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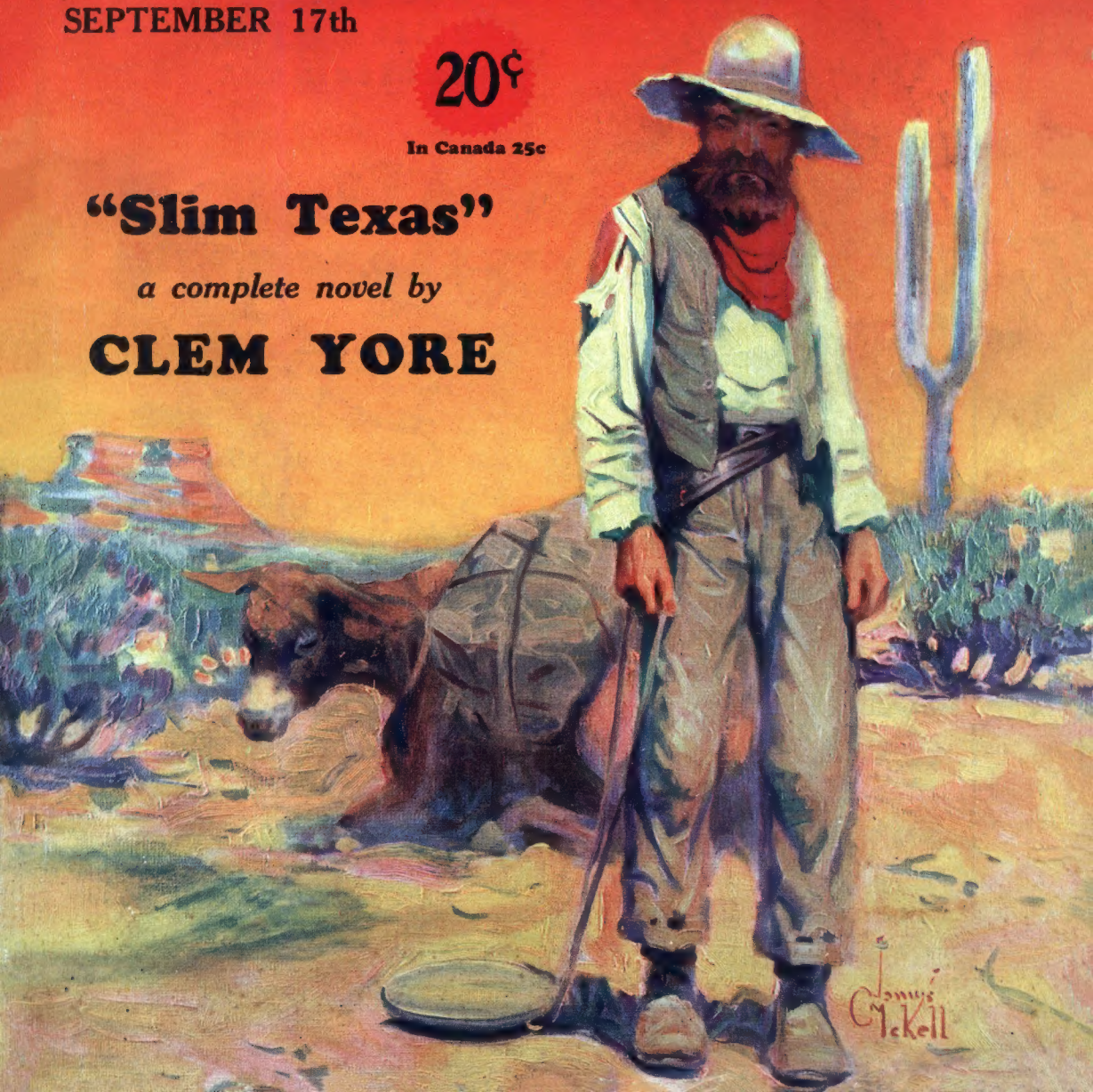

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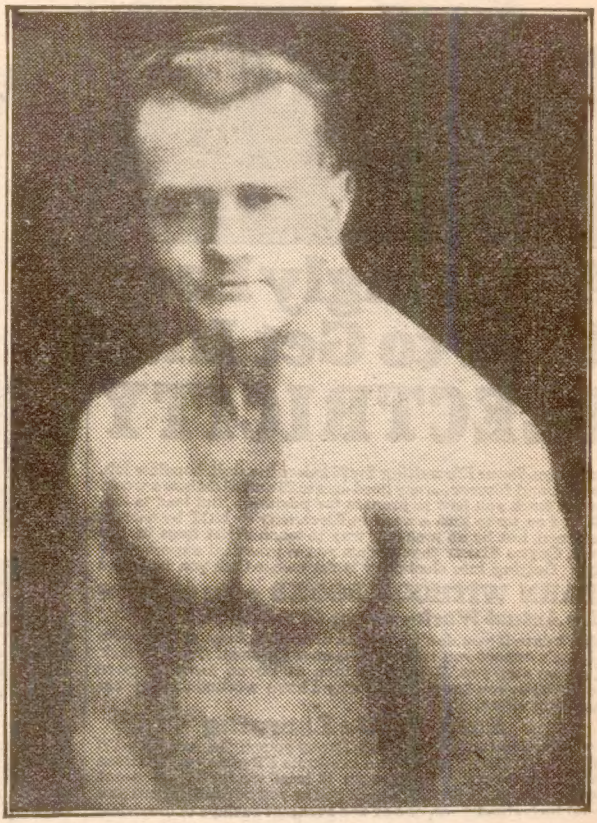

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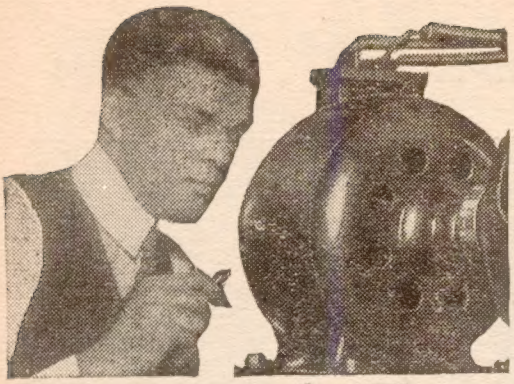

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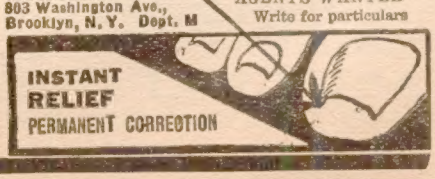

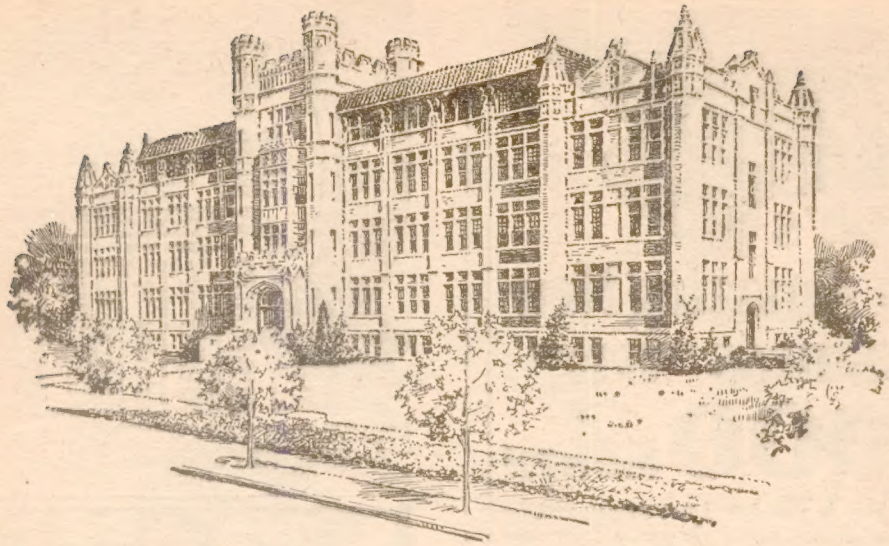

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30x5.00-20"		2.95	1.35	33x4	2.95	1.15	
28x5.25-18"		2.95	1.85	34x4	3.50	1.15	
30x5.25-20"		2.95	1.35	32x4½	3.20	1.45	
31x5.25-21"		3.20	1.85	33x4½	3.20	1.45	
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31x6.00-19"		3.20	1.40	30x5	3.60	1.75	
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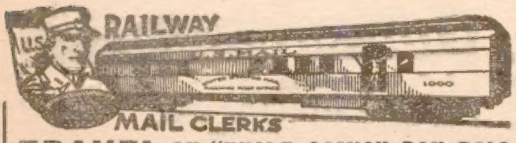

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"Watch him make a fool of himself"—*I heard someone whisper*

—then I started to play!

IT was the first big party of the season and the fun was at its height. The room fairly rocked with laughter as Jim finished his side-splitting imitation of a ballet dancer.

Tom, who was giving the party, turned to me and said, "And now our young friend here will give us his well-known imitation of Paderewski."

Instantly all attention centered upon me. Feigning reluctance, I made as if to beg off, but was forthwith dragged to the piano. Admonitions of "Come on, old timer, do your stuff!"—"Don't be bashful!"—came from all sides.

They expected me to do my usual clowning—but I had a surprise up my sleeve for them. Just as I was about to begin, I heard someone whisper, "Watch him make a fool of himself—why, he can't play a note!"

I Surprised My Friends

They thought I was going to give them my one-finger rendition of chop-sticks. But instead I swung into the opening bars of "The Road to Mandalay"—that rollicking soldier song of Kipling. You should have seen the look of amazement that spread over their faces. This was not the clowning they had expected! Then Tom began to sing. One by one they joined in, until soon they were all crowding around the piano singing away at the top of their lungs.

It was almost an hour before they let me get up from the piano. Then a deluge of questions: "How in the world did you ever do it?"—"Where did you study?"—"When did you learn to play?" — "Who was your teacher?"—"How long have you studied?" "One at a time, please," I begged. "I'll tell you all about it. To begin with, I didn't have any teacher."

"What! Say, you don't expect us to believe that, do you?"

"Sure thing. But I don't blame you for not believing it. I wouldn't have myself. As you know, I've never been able to play. But I always liked music and many a time when I was pepping up a party with my clowning I would have given anything in the world to be able to sit down at the piano and really play.

"But it never occurred to me to take lessons. I thought I was too old—and besides, I couldn't see my way clear towards paying an expensive teacher—to say nothing of the long hours I'd have to put in practicing.

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"I made up my mind to take the course. And believe me that was the luckiest decision of my life! Why, almost before I knew it, I was playing simple tunes! And I studied just whenever I pleased a few minutes a day in my spare time. Now I can play anything I like—ballads, classical numbers, jazz. Listen to this!"

With that I snapped right into a tantalizing jazz number. All evening I was the center of a laughing, singing, hilarious group. And it's been that way at every party I've attended since. * * * *

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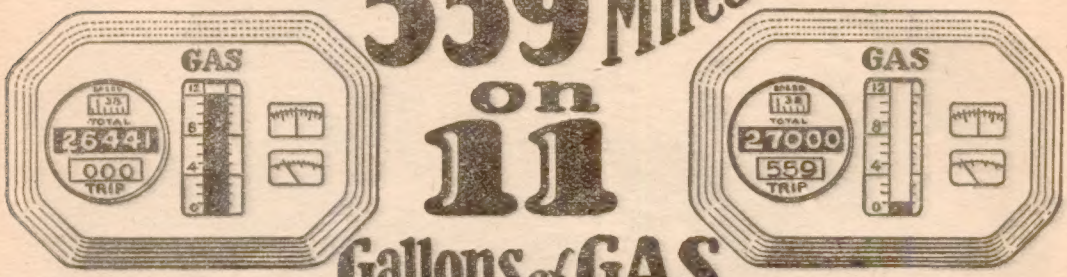

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WEST

R. DE S. HORN, *Editor* | EDMUND COLLIER, *Assoc. Editor*

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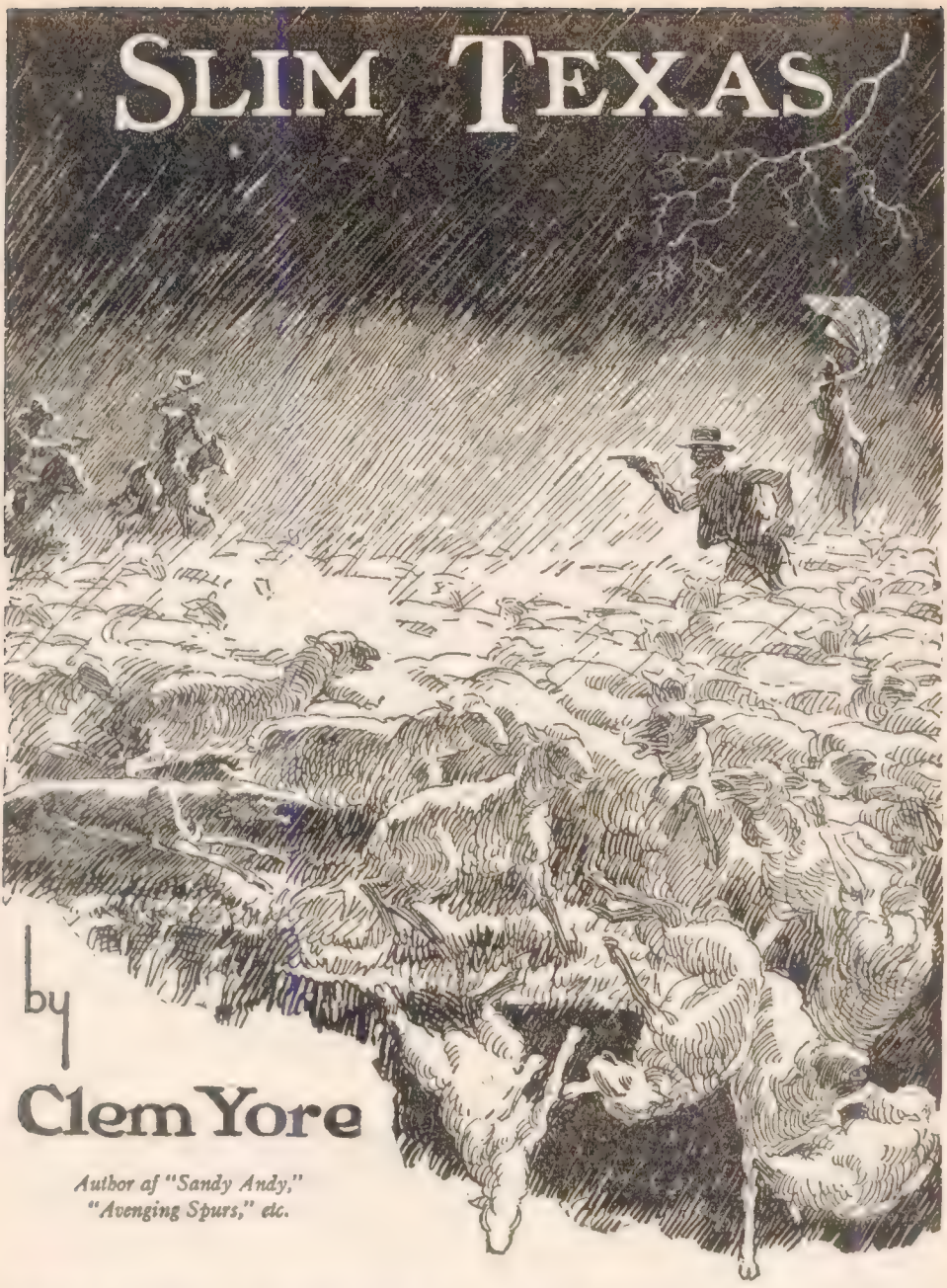


by

Clem Yore

Author of "Sandy Andy," "Avenging Spurs," etc.

At the bloodiest moment of a sheep and cattle war a freckle-faced kid steps in and tears the factions from each other's throats.

CHAPTER I

"Sheep are coming!"

ALANKY, freckle-faced, red-headed boy lay back of a cement water-trough watching and squinting at an approaching horse. Occasionally his spare figure moved to avoid a pet lizard which darted about his face, rearing its head and blinking strangely into the lad's azure eyes as though expectant of some affectionate attention.

"Heronimus, stop pesterin' me or I'll squirt your eyes full of Horseshoe juice," snapped the boy. "Behave yourself, till I sees who this coming jasper is." The lizard darted into the boy's

sleeve, snuggling serenely next to the freckled skin of a thin, tough arm. The boy lifted a saddle-gun until its muzzle showed immediately over the edge of the trough. A click indicated the working of a shell from magazine to chamber. The horseman reined to a sliding stop outside of a tall pole gate.

"Hallo!" he called, eyes searching the house.

"Whatcha a-cravin', Blackie?" asked the boy, menacingly.

"Why, hallo, Texas! Open this gate."

"No, you don't! You stay where you damn are. My pappy told me not to allow nobody inside that gate. And that means, *nobody*. My pappy's little, but his word is sure law. L-a-w! Law! You tackles a tangle when you crosses my pappy."

"You a-treatin' a cowman thisaway?"

"My pappy told me nobody was to come in that gate. And what my pappy tells me is about all they is to it. Whatcha want? I got a right good bead on your second vest-button; and if you got as much sense as God done give to ganders you is goin' to spit out your mind, right now."

A ghost of a laugh came from the horseman.

"You freckle-faced young centipede, would you go for to salivate a man what rid up to your gate?"

"Talk!"

Into the still, white-hot air came the *clippety clop* of a running horse. Blackie turned his face toward the direction of the ringing hoofs. "Your pappy's coming," he said. "Well, I'd better be moseying. So long!"

"Wait! Whatcha wantin', comin' up here like you was?"

"I was a-wantin' talk with Pee Wee Slade, your pappy."

"Then why is you bustin' away for, when you sees him come a-romping on home?"

"I'm hurryin' on with bad news and can't wait no more. You just tell him that Blackie Hook says there's sheep a-comin'."

"More sheep?"

"Goshlemighty, they's comin' like locusts! I'm ridin' to tell the cowmen. This time there's gonna be plenty gilt-edged hell, plumb a-roarin', in this man's country. With them woollies is a lot of flocktenders which is salty killers. So long, tell your pappy!"

Blackie pin-wheeled his pony and was gone. Heronimus slipped out of the sleeve and projected his tongue at Texas; simultaneously emitting a curious sound of sibilation. The boy brought out a wide-necked bottle and deftly spearing a fly at its bottom on a darning needle, gave the insect to the lizard. One gulp and the fly had vanished. Then the lizard leaped like a green streak up the boy's arm where it came to rest, on a shoulder, under a shock of brilliant red hair. Texas arose and opened the gate. Then he walked to the barn where he threw wide a heavy door.

IN A few moments a merry-faced, little, fat, white-haired man nimbly bounced out of a saddle—Pee Wee Slade.

"Pappy," the boy called, "Blackie Hook just rid up to the gate and told me to tell you a mess of sheep was comin'. Plenty sheep, from the way he made out."

"Never mind sheep, son, trouble's behind us this man's day. Son," the merry old eyes sparkled with a dancing light, "this is sure one great day. Know what it is, she is?"

"Nope, I done lost track of her; and, besides that, the clock's stopped, and my Waterbury, too. I been watching the sun by the plum tree's shadow. That's as near as I got to telling the day, or the hour. It's ten minutes past eleven, ain't it?"

The old man pulled out a great bulky watch.

"Sixteen past," he said. "You're pretty good. This is Tuesday, the twelfth, and your birthday. I got one of the wonders of the world to show you!" The old man went to his saddle boot, and pulled out a new gun.

"I got a new, fang-dangled carbine for you," he said. It's a telescope gun. The telescope fits on top the barrel, and through it you can see the whiskers of a flea crawling on a dog a longer ways off than you could see the whole dog with a naked eye. Pick it up, son. I wants to see you balance it." Texas took the gun, examined it, looked at Pee Wee, his eyes dancing.

"She sure is a dinger!" exclaimed Texas, patting the new gun. "And I've got all them high spots on that ridge stowed away in my mind. I knows to a gnat's knee cap how to drop a bullet on

any of them hideout stones. Now, let them lousy sheep herders go to pot-shooting at this *casa!* And if I don't slide down to the rock we calls Old Abraham and take up my stalking-seat, you can shut off my rations.

"From Old Abraham I can get a five-hundred-yard range at most all that ridge. If it's war them *hombres* is craving, me and this rootin'-tootin'-shootin' gun will pack it to 'em a-plenty. *Sheepmen!* Lord, such low down varmints! I hates 'em worse than I does diamond back rattlesnakes!"

Suddenly the boy paused. His face grew sober. "Pappy," he said. "This is my birthday. Pappy, this day's the day. You done said, more'n often, that when I was a man you'd tell me how come that brand on my chest. I'm sixteen, and, every-which-ways, a plumb man."

Pee Wee winced as though from a sudden chill.

"Pappy, you sure likes Texas, don't you? You sure always strains a point for me, don't you? You sure has been mammy, pappy, brother and pal to me, ain't you? Now, how come them heart-brands on my chest?"

Pee Wee's geniality died.

"Don't sonny, don't! Not today. I pinches all up, when I thinks of them days." Both the boy and the old man stared into each other's eyes as a vagrant breath of air stirred across the room of the mountain ranch-house bringing with it a pungent, stinging, stench. "Goat," said Pee Wee. *"Ugh!"*

"Sheep," commented Texas. "Smelly sheep. Go on pappy."

"Texas—don't let's talk about them days. I'll say this, though, that ain't no brand, no man-made, iron-burn, on your breast. That's a birth mark. A sort of strawberry."

Birth mark? What's that?"

"That strawberry was on you when you was born. It'll stay where it is, till you cashes in."

"Bad blood, maybe?"

"No! Just a quirk of nature, like a horse what's got one pink and one white eye. One of the wonders of the Lord, which no man understands."

A sharp thudding sound smacked viciously near the door.

Then came the echo of a distant rifle's boom, sounding from the cliffs across the bottom. Man and boy ran to the window in time to see a figure arise from a rock and run out of sight. Texas grabbed up a rifle, Pee Wee shoved open the window and sent a bullet at the place where he had last seen the running man on the cliffs. Then he walked outside where he joined Texas.

"There's where it lit, pappy. Right in that second log under the overhang of the roof," said Texas, pointing.

"Texas, yonder's where a bullet smacked when you was a baby. There's where a bunch of 'em hit when I was settin' back of a open window readin' by a lamp; there's the scars of the forty-fives which marked the last time sheep and cowmen fought it out for this grass. Now the sheep is comin' again. And there'll be more shootin's, more killin's. We gotta watch out; keep outa sight. You're big, now. I don't want you salivated."

"If you'd only not wear that white Stetson and them blue overalls and that spotted ridin' vest, pappy! You is as notorious-lookin' as a railroad water-tank running agin the skyline of the desert. I'm sure afraid they'll get you, on account of them clothes."

"Shucks, us cowmen is to have a meetin', tonight, right in my house. We aims to plan how to put the crimps in those herders."

DEAD MAN'S RIDGE snaked its weather-worn and wind-worked way between the Three Rivers Valley and the hay bottoms of Pee Wee Slade's Bear Paw ranch. Sheepmen were in the Three Rivers district, cowmen across the ridge. Sheep would occupy the flats, mesas, and the bottoms around water holes and bordering rivers until after lambing-time; for the sheep had been driven south, slowly, to lamb.

At least sixty herders, desperate gunmen in the employ of the sheep outfits, had escorted the sheep safely past the cowmen before these had roused to prevent the passage of the despised range-destroyers. As soon as the lambs had arrived, and, the yews had become stronger, the sheep would be moved to the high feed-grounds where cattle had been accustomed to graze during the summer heat. Everybody knew that the outbreak of war was but a matter of days, weeks at the outside. Desultory and long range shooting had taken place that afternoon.

Now the preliminary meeting was in progress at Pee Wee's. He and his men, because the Bear Paw was nearer to the sheep headquarters than other ranches, had been appointed sentinels. Fire and smoke signals and the heliograph had been agreed upon. When the time was ripe Pee Wee's men would warn the others. That meeting chilled the boy, Texas. He couldn't stand hearing the grim, low voices of the cowmen. He walked outside; Heronimus on his shoulder, Gingerbread at his heels.

The stars caught and held his attention. "Clean," he mused, "them stars. They's always clean and pretty, Gingerbread. Nothin' wrong with stars. But sheep and sheepmen! Dirtiest, messiest bunch what ever cluttered up a country. I want you to always hate a sheep and a sheepman. Dog, do you listen to me?" Gingerbread nibbled his understanding upon Texas' wrist.

In the wan moon and starlight, a note, visible on the barn door, caught and held Texas' eyes. He dropped to the ground as he detected it, sensing danger, and sent Gingerbread to reconnoiter shadow clusters. Satisfied, at last, that no lurking herder was about, Texas ran to the door and removed the patch of white paper. In the barn he struck a match and read:

Pee Wee Slade, we've come back.
And this time we get what we're after.
That bullet we sent today
was a messenger meaning bloody business.

THAT terse writing sent terror deep into Texas' being. In a corner of the barn he sat, eyes roving Dead Man's Ridge; his teeth gritting, his heart pounding. Gingerbread licked one of his hands. The cowmen broke up their meeting at length and it wasn't until they rode from the Bear Paw yard that Texas calmed himself sufficiently to walk bravely toward the ranch-house.

Passing the bunkhouse he motioned for two of the hands, sitting beside the open door, to meet him. One of these, Toots Malone, sensing the uncommon, from the fear-streaked face of the boy, jumped to meet him; the other, Gabby Gallagher, followed his mate.

"Texas, son, has you run a rusty nail in your foot?" shot Toots Malone. "You looks like a red-headed ghost."

"Stand where the lantern light will hit this, then read it to Gabby," answered Texas, extending the written notice he had found. Toots read it; Gabby gave vent to a click of a laugh that sounded vicious to the boy. He stared from face to face. Gabby blurted:

"What we-all done, this man's night, is goin' to stampede them sheepmen out of this country fast. Why didn't you stay for the final resolutions, Texas?"

"I don't give a hang for resolutions. I was sick at my stomach, watchin' murder makin' in the eyes of all you boys. I reckon I had a hunch. If I hadn't come out maybe I wouldn't of found this note till mornin', and then pappy might of been gun-fodder. There's somethin' dirty hidden in that writing. I ask you, old podners, what has them lousy sheepmen got on my daddy?"

Toots gave him the note, then said explosively, "Nothin' a-tall. Now you run along into the house and take that note to Pee Wee. Don't you go to gettin' freckled all over with skeer, now. Run on in, Texas. That note's a lot of so much brag-talk."

Texas, reassured, walked to the main house, where, after dropping Heronimus to the corner of the wood-box, where the lizard made his bed beside that of Gingerbread, he stared into the living room. There sat Pee Wee, an open Bible on his knees, his brass spectacles far down on his nose, a finger tracing out words on a page.

"Pappy!"

Pee Wee slammed shut the book; jerked off his glasses.

"Read this, I found it tacked to the barn door. While you-all was resolutin', a sheepherder sneaked to the barn and tacked that thing there to the door."

PEE WEE read the note. His face blanched. A haggard look came over his fat cheeks; he stretched out a hand and found the boy's arm.

"Go to bed, sonny, I wants to be alone."

"What does them mangy sheepmen mean when they says *'this time we get what we're after'?*"

"That's man-talk, sonny. No kinda talk for boys."

"Pappy, out there, a while ago, I looked up at the stars. And they sure

was clean-looking. Then I seemed to fill up with a messy kind of ugliness. Seems like something prodded me and kept on saying, *'you gotta kill you a sheepman.'* I hates them herders, pappy; and I'm studying out a scheme to get me one of 'em."

"You better get you gone to bed. We gotta be up right early. I'm ridin' away with the boys. And I'm leavin' you alone to watch the ranch. We planned a campaign tonight. And tomorrow we locates all them bands of sheep. When the time is ripe we gets this business over with, *pronto.*"

"Can I tag along—Gingerbread, me, and my rifle?"

"Won't be no place for boys. Too much cruelty, sonny. We aims to kill sheep by the hundreds. There'll be shooting, and men will go down. Nope, 'tain't goin' to be no place for a boy like *my* son. Boy, don't you know your pappy sure loves even the dust on your run-down boots?"

"If ary a sheepman scratches your skin with a knife or a gun I'll have a slice of his liver for my breakfast!" Texas exclaimed. "Nothin's goin' to happen to you, pappy. I'll stay at this house, and me and Gingerbread will sure keep our eyes peeled. Anyhow, that doggone Heronimus is as slick a watch hound as a man could meet up with in a four-day ride. He heard, smelt or seen Blackie before I caught his pony's dust. Heronimus and Gingerbread with me, and I don't care what them herders try. I'll have any bet they make coppered before they starts. Goodnight, I sees worry in your eyes."

"Take your gun to bed with you. And leave your door open. Pull your bed out from the window, and let the terrier sleep in your room."

"Does you think——?"

"This war, sonny, *is to the last man.* Once, and for all time, sheepmen gotta know they can't run no woollies on this grass. All us cowmen have shook hands on that, and we've sent out for thirty more gun-fightin' fools. I'm to have ten of them boys with me."

Chapter II

GROWING TROUBLE

ALL night Texas wrestled with fear and nightmarish dreams in which sheep and sheepmen stagnated or made panic of his mind. When he awoke Pee Wee was making the fire.

"Up so soon, sonny?"

"Pappy, are you ridin' out today?"

"Yes, before the sun gets up. Go feed my gray gelding, and hand me a nosebag on my horn. I'm takin' your advice. I've put my fancy hat, vest and ridin'-gear by; and I'm ridin' today in overalls and an old hat. My pony, and your pony, I'm leavin' behind."

"Pappy why? Do you reckon on a big scrap?"

"We aim to prowl around and locate all the sheep bands. The fightin' will come when the sheepmen refuse to move the sheep."

"But the ewes gotta lamb first."

Pee Wee looked at his son keenly, amazement and something strange in his eyes. "You takin' the part of lousy sheep?" he asked, mildly.

"No, but you ain't never been cruel to dumb critters."

"Go feed my horse. When you come back we'll have breakfast with the boys. War is war, sonny. Hate's the basis of all war; hate and yearning for money. Sometime I'll tell you about them things. Toots Malone is stayin' at home today. He's got bunks to make for the new hands, and I want two watchers on this place."

Texas moved out to the bench, washed, dried his face and hands and combed his hair with a comb tied to a string beneath a triangular piece of looking glass held to the kitchen door by tacks. Then he went to the barn. Gingerbread was with him. After a while came Heronimus who had been released from the kitchen by Pee Wee. The lizard raced up the pant leg of the boy as he leaned over a feed box. The clammy feel of the reptile at his neck awoke Texas from his meditation." Daggone you, Heronimus, you're creepy, crawlly and no 'count, but you're a lovin' little scoundrel." Without question Heronimus knew what he said. His tongue licked the boy's ear lobe.

AFTER breakfast in a rush of dust came Blackie Hook and rode away with Pee Wee and his boys. Texas didn't like this man; and said as much to Toots Malone. Gingerbread's roach always arose when Blackie was present. Heronimus always darted out of sight.

Toots was busy in the bunkhouse making a row of new bunks in which to sleep the extra hands who had been detailed for Pee Wee to care for. Texas stood on watch at the barns; and back of a pepper tree windbreak he spent the morning rehearsing his old pony, Jim in old and new tricks. Toots looked from the bunkhouse window and saw Texas lifting a bag of sand to the pony's back. "Whatcha doin', Texas?"

"Teachin' this old plug to carry a dummy load. I got ideas, I have. Just you wait. I ain't sayin' nothin', but I've got somethin' heavy hangin' on my mind."

"How's that ridge? Seen any lookouts yet?"

"Nope. I swept them rocks with the telescope but I reckon they're all busy watchin' pappy. Why was Blackie ridin' with our Bear Paw spread this morning?"

"He agreed to. What you got agin him?"

"I'm a hunch hound. I don't like what Gingerbread don't like. And a man a lizard is shy of is sure-enough poison to me."

After lunch and a smoke for Toots, a chew for Texas, both went about their morning tasks. Texas had a pocketfull of brown sugar for old Jim and had the pony following him all over the yard. A bag of sand was slung over the saddle, and this weight the pony endured for the sake of the sweets. Toward three o'clock Toots dropped his tools in answer to a hail from Texas. The old cowman hurried to the barn, and what he saw amazed him.

There on the back of old Jim was the effigy of a human figure, the riding-form of a little, old, fat man. On the image was the big white hat, vest and loud shirt of Pee Wee Slade.

"Say have you gone loco?" he asked.

"Toots, you can keep a secret, can't you?"

"All the time. I won't say nothin' to nobody, but if I does tell it I'll sure make such a feller agree not to tell nothin' I told him. Whatcha tryin' to do?"

"Teachin' old Jim. Now you hold this little son of a gun until you hear me whistle. Then turn him loose. Drop back of the pepper trees and see what happens."

Texas hurried through the tackle room and out a rear door. After a while came his whistle. Jim's ears stiffened; he tried to get out. Then Toots opened the door, and out sprang the pony. He made a beeline for a cluster of high rocks called Old Abraham from which a low, long-drawn, one-note whistle was coming. Toots, watching from the shelter of the windbreak, laughed. For all the world that effigy on the bronc's back looked the counterpart of Pee Wee Slade. At Old Abraham Jim met the boy and the two made a pretty picture as they fondled and nudged one another.

Three times that action was repeated; and each time the pony seemed eager for the running-walk to the rocks. Toots waited until the boy returned with the horse then cornered him.

"What's all this make-believe, Texas?"

"I wants them lousy sheepmen to believe that my pappy ain't takin' no hand in this war. I don't want pappy killed."

"But you said there were no sheep watchers on Dead Man's Ridge. How about that?"

"I ain't takin' no chances. My hunch in workin', sixty hundred to the ton, and it tells me this is a stem-windin' sure-fire game I'm playin'."

"All right, put up that pony and go peel some spuds. I'll be through with my job in a little while and I'll help you get supper."

WHEN Pee Wee returned with his men the night-shadows were dropping into the bottoms fast. While the men washed up Texas studied Pee Wee's face. Hard lines creased the ruddy cheeks and broad rolling brow. "Pappy, whatcha studyin' about?"

"We seen lots of sheep, most all day; but we never got sight of a herder. But we knowed they was hid in the pear- and juniper-thickets. Them sheep is there by the thousand. If they feeds one summer, on the hill ranges, we're done down in this country."

"Blacky come back with you?"

"Yep, he's stayin' over for supper. Lay him a plate."

"What's he snoopin' around here for, pappy?"

"Belongs, sonny. Part of what he agreed to do. He rides with us, and we

rides with him. He's got big responsibilities, *now.*"

"Watcha mean, *now?* He ain't nothin' but a foreman."

"Both his bosses is away in the East. The outfit is all on his shoulders. He told me he was sure worried. Here comes this trouble to the range, and he's got a roundup comin' off. Got to cut out three train loads of young beef and ship, soon. And he's skeered pink somethin's goin' to happen to them white-face cows. He's feared of them sheepmen."

"What might they go for to do?"

"Go to killin' cows out of revenge if we start proddin' them. And we're sure-enough goin' to stampede them sheep and drive the herders out the country. I feels sorry for Blackie, I really do."

"That ain't what put them creases in your forehead. You can't kid me, pappy, I been studyin' your face too long. Now, come clean. What's troublin' you?"

"You really wanna know?"

"Yes."

"Then it's you. I'm afraid somethin's goin' to happen to you. 'Fraid if I gets hurt you'll suffer, or afraid them skunks will try to pot-shoot you when I'm gone. That's what made me keep Toots here, today. I sweat blood, worryin' all this day."

"You makes me sick. I was a-worryin' about you. You're such a daggone good fat target. And a little man, for some reason, is always poppin' out where he don't belong. Sometimes, pappy, I thinks you're weasel-wise; then ag'in I thinks your brain is turtle-gaited, you're so slow when it comes to doing what's right for your own sake.

"The only wrong what could happen to me would be for you to go get yourself killed in maybe six places at once. That would do me dog-wrong, sure. If you was to leave me—shucks! there's that coffee boilin' over!" Texas flew to the stove to conceal his emotion. Pee Wee smiled sadly and walked away.

THE men filed in to the supper table like so many stalking silences; they ate in a thick stillness. Only Blackie Hook made a try at conversation; but his attempt was a miserable failure. Something very like fear dwelt in that room. Only the clattering of dishes, knives and forks, stirrings of tin spoons in tin coffee cups broke the singing of a large copper water kettle on the stove.

Then the boys filed out, wiping mouths, lighting cigarettes, some of them staring strangely into the eyes of Texas. Pee Wee called Blackie into the living room. Toots and Texas washed the dishes, and as they splashed in a big pan the low hum of Pee Wee's and Blackie's voices broke into the kitchen monotonously. When the last dish was stacked on table or on shelf Toots and the boy joined Pee Wee and Hook.

"Sonny, How's your mouth organ? Couldn't we have The Midnight Express? Blackie wants to hear you play."

"My mouth's sure funny-dry. I don't reckon I could make out very well, tonight." Something abysmal sounded in the boy's tones. Pee Wee stared at him. The young, smileful lips looked hard. These were like twin white slits. The eyes were still—wickedly still—and fixed on the face of Blackie, and in them a dull smudge of green fire sucked up the yellow lamp light like the orbs of a cat caught cornered in a cave by a man with a candle. Pee Wee's face took on a hard, worried look.

"Sonny, you entertain Blackie. Toots, you come along with me."

Pee Wee went outside with Toots following him.

"These is tough days, Texas," said Blackie. "I reckon you sees how the hands is takin' it?"

"Yeah. Mighty ugly them boys was at supper. What did you-all do today? Kill somebody?"

The air seemed sliced with the gritting sound of Blackie's quick laugh. "Nope, nobody busted a cap. But we're sure gonna, some of these times. What we was after was to get the sheep all bedded-down in our minds. Did a lotta ridin', near forty miles, it seemed like. We had change-horses, four times. Pee Wee sure knows this country, Texas."

"Yep he does. Better than you, I reckon. You ain't been here long, have you?"

"Not long." Blackie picked up the mouth-organ. "Give us that tune, Texas."

"No, I don't feel like it. Where'd you ride today?"

"Aw, come on! Here, play this dern thing. I used to play a harmonicy. And ring bells, too, at the same time. Come on, play it!" With one hand Blackie

extended the tin instrument, and with the other grasped the thin shoulders of the boy.

Then Blackie Hook seemed to rouse with a sudden fury. His face took on a sweep of eager frenzy. One of his hands pulled back the boy's shirt collar, and was jerking at it, to wrench it free from the button which held it, when something broke in Texas' brain. With a sudden jerk the boy reached to the table and picked up a weighted quirt. The butt of this was loaded with buckshot. Like a snapping whiplash the quirt sped through the air and crashed against the skull of Blackie, dropping the man like a felled ox.

TEXAS was standing over his victim, the quirt in his hand, his face an ugly, yellowish white, his eyes blazing, sunken and maniacal, when Pee Wee, Toots and an old, tall, kindly-faced man entered the room.

"Sonny!" exclaimed Pee Wee, startled by what he saw.

"He was twistin' me about," answered Texas. "Made believe he was teasin' me to play my mouth-organ; but he was tryin' to yank open my collar. I sure took my Sunday swing at him with this loaded quirt. He better keep shy of me."

Texas walked into his room, lighted his lamp, closed his door. He opened his collar and stared at his upper breast. Twin hearts greeted his eyes. Two perfect heart outlines, one lapping over the other. The boy pressed a finger upon the scarred region. Unquestionably there were ridges about those hearts.

"Birth mark," he mused. "That's not so. Pappy done lied about that. I reckon I knows a brand, when I sees it. I been branded, I have. Now, I wonder why? And why was Blackie wantin' to get a look at that dern thing?"

Gingerbread clawed at the door. Texas admitted him and the lizard, and played with his pets on the bed. Soon there slammed a front door. Blackie was going away. Toots went with him. Blackie's horse sounded on the road, then vanishing hoof beats told of the man's final going. Pee Wee's voice was heard from the kitchen.

"Sonny, come on out. I want you to meet Judge Terry."

Judge Terry was a great man to the boy. He lived in Jimtown, and Jimtown, the county seat, was to Texas a place of fascination. Judge Terry ran the law-business there. He could send a man to jail, or take away your cattle if you didn't pay your taxes. Judge Terry was square, though. Everybody admitted that. He was the only law in a country three hundred miles one way, by one hundred and sixty the other. He went from section to section holding court, trying cases, calling juries, transacting business. Texas opened his door and walked into the living room.

"Hello, Texas," smiled the judge. "Gracious, how you have grown! Remember the last time I saw you?"

"Yes, I was twelve then. Howdy, Judge!"

"What made you hit Blackie, boy?"

"He was mauling me." Texas looked sullen.

"But this sudden gust of anger must have been—*crazy-like*. Do you ever have fits like that, much?"

"First time ever I got thataway, before, Judge. He riled me."

"He was pretty mad, Texas, when he come to. Yes he was. And soon's he saw me he wanted to swear to a warrant for assault. He claimed you hit him when he was stooping over. Tell me your side of it."

"I'll tell it all, just as it come off."

Texas narrated what had preceded his attack on Hook. "Seemed to me," he concluded, "that he was a-wantin' to get a look at my naked breast. It wasn't what he done, that got me. It was what I seen workin' in his eyes. I'm a hunch-hound, I am, and somethin' told me to stop his paws from tearin' open my shirt."

"Lay back your shirt, Texas," said Pee Wee. "Judge Terry wants to look at that birthmark." Texas pulled aside his shirt.

"Umph," grunted the Judge, staring through his glasses. "Mighty funny. Now Pee Wee, who is this Blackie, anyhow?"

"I'm aimin' to find out, Judge, I sure am. That's all, sonny, run out to the bunkhouse. Judge and me wants to chatter."

TOOTS had returned. He was waiting for Texas. They went together to the wind-mill. "I sure sent that Blackie on his way," announced Toots. "And I would've

braided my gun around his brow if he had of said "scat!" You done just right. Do you know why the Judge come up here?"

"No, why?"

"He's tryin' to stop this comin' war. In the mornin' he's goin' over to see the sheepmen. Seems like they've been to Jimtown. He told some of the boys that. Ain't he more womanish than ary man you ever seen?"

"Look here, Toots, I wanna know somethin'. You've knowed I and my pappy a long time. How come I got that birthmark on my bussum?"

"Is you got a mark on your bussum?"

"Maybe you don't know about it; then you keep your mouth shet, willya? Blackie was tryin' to finger that thing. I thinks my pappy's lyin' about that, Toots. It's no birthmark! It's a stamp-brand. Two hearts it is. Not hangin'-hearts; not one under the other; but side by side, like they was linked together. Does you think my pappy woulda burnt me when I was a little whipper-snapper, so's he'd know me same's a lost maverick?"

"I never knew you, them days. Ask Pee Wee. He'll sure tell you. Don't you trust your pappy?"

"Surest thing you know; but sometimes daddies tells most anybody else things they wouldn't go for to tell their own kids. I reckon they's somethin' funny about me and that brand. I been studyin' about that, a long, long time."

From far down the road, in the direction Blackie had taken, up from a small knoll, there arose a sudden flick of flame. Once, twice, three times that blaze flashed. Then there passed an interval of time. Again came the tongues of light licking the far darkness. Once, twice, three times, a repetition of the first spurts of fire. Signals, no doubt of that! Toots swung his eyes around. There, on an upper edge of Dead Man's Ridge, shot a beam. Two fast streaks of flame cut into the skyline. And then two more.

"The son-of-a-gun," muttered Toots. "Fire-signals!"

"Was you thinkin' of Blackie?" asked Texas.

"I dunno; but somebody in the cow country is sure sending signals to sheepmen, you can bet your sweet life on that. I'm gonna tell Pee Wee and the judge."

Toots hurried away. Texas walked to the pepper trees and stared at the first streaks tingeing the sky where the moon would soon arise. A great stifling dwelt around the region of his heart.

"I sure wishes I was a kid ag'in," he said. "Gettin' old don't bring nothing much but worries."

A sound back of him attracted his attention. All of the Bear Paw hands were filing into the main house. Texas walked that way. Pee Wee met him.

"We'll be done in a little while, sonny," he said. "You amuse yourself outside. The judge wants to talk, serious, to all my boys." The door closed, shutting out the light.

A wind stirred the dry, rustling leaves of the pepper trees. Sounds came from the desert—the long roll of the drums of the night winds out beyond Dead Man's Ridge. These called to Texas; called and called to his young, gallant heart. What was going on, over there? What were the sheepmen doing? Why was he thinking, like this? A shudder passed along his thin, tall frame. "Ugh!" he winced. "Sheepmen! What's makin' me think of them?"

A big gold plate of a moon rolled over the horizon.

Chapter III

WAR OPENS

HOW and when they arrived Texas did not know; but when he awoke the yard was full of strange horses, and at breakfast ten new faces sat around the table. The cook-shack shook with rough talk, laughter and coarse by-play. Toots knew several of the new men; Gabby Gallagher was having the time of his life. All the men were dust-covered, except where a quick wash-up had cleaned the grime in a half moon over their countenances. Judge Terry knew almost all of the cowmen. Several of them wore their guns tied down. Two had funny-looking, swivel-holsters.

As he washed, Texas examined the weapons and their holsters which had been hung on small pegs just inside the kitchen. Pee Wee whispered that the strangers were the gunmen loaned by ranchers at the north end of the county. They would remain at the Bear Paw until the sheep trouble was over. None of the newcomers seemed to pay much attention to the boy. They looked

at him, but none of them talked to him. He felt neglected, and after breakfast rode off to the east pasture on old Jim.

Texas was two fences away from the house when he saw Pee Wee and the hands jog off up the bottoms. Gingerbread and Heronimus went with Texas. They alone seemed natural to him; even the day was strange. Half-way back to the house, after Pee Wee had left, Texas saw Judge Terry riding west. He was riding directly for the trail which led up and over Dead Man's Ridge, that trail which never a Bear Paw horse had marked since the first signs of the sheepmen had appeared. It was taboo, that trail. Now Judge Terry was traveling it. He was sure game, that old man.

Texas watched him vanish in the shimmering heat waves which danced along the crest of the ridge. Then he rode back and sought Toots.

"Salty bunch, that," Texas said, nodding his head toward where the cowboys had ridden.

"All good, square, fast-shootin', hard-ridin' cowboys, son. They're bent on doin' what's to be done and gettin' on back to their work. Today, I reckon, your pappy breaks them all in on the lay of the land down this end of the country. After that them fellers will be at home."

"Won't you tell me what took place last night?"

"You wouldn't know about them things. You sure wouldn't."

"All right, I reckon if I got to go this here thing alone I sure can do it. I ain't goin' to squat down here and suck my thumbs! What are you to me, a wet-nurse or a watch pup?"

Toots laughed.

"Your pappy wants two men on the home ranch. I ain't watchin' you. You can ride anyways you wants, do what you pleases; but nobody comes on this place, unless I knows him."

"Well, I'm goin' to take my new rifle and the pony and get me a wild turkey. I'll be up on the high sandhills. Maybe I'll be back in time for supper; but if I ain't, can you get along?"

"Sure. That'll do you good. But see you sticks to the sandhills. Keep away from Dead Man's Ridge with both feet."

"I'll take a lunch."

"So long, I got a bunch of old pack-saddles to rig. Them new boys will be needin' outfits in a day or two. We're keepin' men at all the old line-camps, from this on."

OUT of sight of the ranch, and when he reached the sand hills, Texas swung his pony into the pear thickets and hurried away. Old Jim had plenty of speed and nothing pleased him quite so much as to be carrying the boy on his back. Inside of two hours Texas had picked up the trail of Pee Wee and his men. He followed it until he saw it lead up and over the scrub hills to the west. In these he could lose himself and no man need know where he had gone. From high point to high point he went trying to catch a glimpse of Pee Wee; but he saw nothing. Faintly he heard the pitiful blat of distant sheep; often he caught the repulsive sting of a strong stench carried on the west wind. Sheep were near, that was certain; and toward these his father and his crew were riding. Something was bound to happen. His ears strained.

Topping a rise a sight sent a throe of fear through Texas. Directly beneath him, in a small clearing, Pee Wee and his men were sitting their horses in a ring. And before them were other mounted men, each holding a rifle crosswise on his saddlehorn. These men wore high-crowned, black, curiously-shaped hats. *Sheepmen! Sheepmen's hats!*

Suddenly Pee Wee and the tallest figure among the sheepmen moved aside and talked together some distance from the other men. They talked long, with many gestures. Pee Wee's very actions told the boy that he was aroused. Then the two men broke apart. Pee Wee leveled a finger at his companion of the instant before. Obviously he was angry and laying down some strong talk. Then the parley ended. Sheepmen vanished into the thicket, Pee Wee's band disappeared in the heavy vegetation of the hills.

The heart of the boy galloped furiously with a strange beating. His mind raced with conjecture and foreboding. Like the mutter of faraway drums came a sound of thunder. Texas glanced into the west and beheld a heavy battalion of rain clouds rolling over the distant range. "Rain's comin'," he mused. "Them sheepmen is playin' in luck There'll be plenty of water all over this

desert at lambin' time. And that'll mean plenty feed for the weak ewes. I reckon it just ain't in the cards for the cowmen to drive off these human polecats."

Soon Texas saw Pee Wee's figure cross an open patch, then the file of men back of him. They were on their way home. Texas squinted at the sun. He had lost track of time and now saw that it was after three o'clock. And he had not fed old Jim, nor eaten his lunch.

Watching the spot where he knew Pee Wee would appear when he crossed back into the Bear Paw country Texas pulled the bridle from his pony and swung the feedbag straps over its head. While old Jim fed, Texas nibbled his lunch. After Pee Wee came into sight and had vanished, the boy sought a waterhole where he and the pony satisfied their thirst.

Texas was heading for home, when, as he was passing through a heavy growth of mesquite and greasewood, he thought he heard the sound of a man's voice raised in a peculiar cry. He stopped his pony, listened. Once more came that sound. Then there arose on the muggy air a poor imitation of the cry of the small desert owl. Directly before him sounded the walk of a horse; then this ceased to be followed by the approach of another horse. Evidently two men had just met.

TEXAS dismounted, took a pigging-string from a saddle-pocket and fashioned a crude muzzle over old Jim's nose. He then tied up the pony and tip-toed ahead to where he thought he could hear the men talking. Suddenly the sun was hidden. The rain clouds were gathering, fast. A drop or two of rain struck his hat. He looked at the sky. Overhead black monsters were rolling and surging everywhere.

Texas came to where the horses had met. It was obvious from their tracks that neither had more than hesitated at that spot. They were walking ahead, slowly. Texas hurried forward, and just as he saw a small open spot before him he heard a curse, some indistinguishable words and then a shot followed by another. The barks of those explosions told the boy that they had been made by a heavy revolver. Stunned by the assurance that a murder had just been committed, Texas was in the act of hurrying back to his pony when he heard a horse galloping away before him. Then came a crack of thunder and its reverberations echoed fiercely all about him. A riderless horse darted almost to him, shied and stopped at the sight of the boy, and stood watching him.

"Help! Help!"

That cry came piteously out of the region from which had rung the shots. Texas waited for no more, but leading the horse he had stopped walked to where a man lay on the sand. Two great wounds showed in his breast out of which pulsed heavy flows of blood. Texas dropped to the wounded man, and saw that he was a sheepherder. He knew him from his clothes, his hat.

"Who done it?" Texas blurted.

The man's eyes took on a strange look, as they fixed themselves on the boy's face, and clearly the sight of Texas had startled the wounded man. He tried to speak; but his lips colored red, a rattle came to his throat, his head dropped, and he slumped limp in the boy's arms. It was the first time death had approached Texas, and the nearness of it appalled him. What was he to do? How should he act? Maybe one of his pappy's boys had done this thing? These queries racked his mind.

Before he knew what he was doing Texas was leading up the dead man's horse. Then came the rain. It dropped with a quick sheetlike downpour which matched the savage ferocity of mingled fear and fair-dealing which was urging the boy to rope the dead man across his saddle and turn his pony loose to take the corpse somewhere where the man's people would get him.

Texas accomplished this with fast effort, though it taxed his strength to get the man into the saddle. Once there Texas tied him firmly and faced his horse down the hill to the flats. Then something gleaming, wet and shiny, from the earth caught Texas' attention. He picked it up. It was a silver concha, an engraved bit of shell-like decoration which held the wings of chaps together. In it were two small holes through which a bit of whang-leather was used as a tie-string to fix the concha to the chap.

Texas examined the chaps of the dead man. On these there were no conchas. This, then, had been lost by the one who had committed the murder. Texas placed

the thing in his pocket, slapped the horse on the rump and saw it start rapidly for the southwest. He hurried back to old Jim, mounted and quickly rode through the storm for the Bear Paw.

On the way he was troubled. What would he do about that murder? Should he tell his pappy? Ought he confess to what he had seen? He didn't know; but the longer he rode the more confusion gripped him. However, as he neared his home the storm lessened and now a slow drizzle settled down. He knew this would continue through the night. And that the rain would wash away all possible tracks which might lead the herders to a solution of the killing. It would also prevent his pappy from finding out where he had been that day. Then came a decision. He would say nothing to anyone about the killing he had witnessed; no, nor of the concha he had found; but he'd sure watch out for the man who wore chaps decorated with such bits of engraved silver.

THE next morning Toots Malone brought in this startling bit of writing which he had found attached to the top wire of a fence.

War opens! You shot Hiram Jedrow yesterday. Now, Pee Wee, it's your life for his.

Texas swung around and faced his pappy. The old, jovial cheeks were pallid, a haunting expression filled every feature, the eyes looked like those of a whipped dog.

"Hiram Jedrow, did it say?" he asked.

"Yes, Pee Wee, Hiram Jedrow. I wonder where that killing occurred," said Toots, vacantly. Texas arose, sick at his stomach. Every eye in the room followed him as he called his dog and picked up the lizard just before he flung open the door and hurried outside.

"Boys," said Pee Wee, "you gotta watch yourselves, from this on out. That Texas is mighty cute, and knows a lot more than he lets on. Now don't give him ary chance to suspect that any man among you knows a thing about Hi Jedrow. Promise me this, willya?"

A murmur of assent ran around the room.

Up at the barn Texas stared down at the scarecrow effigy of Pee Wee which was slumped in a corner of the harness room. It seemed to the boy that that shape was a warning. Someday his pappy would be like that, all slumped down, huddled in a heap, limp, dead. "If they do that, them sheep herders," he said to Gingerbread, "I'll sure go hog-wild. Hiram Jedrow was thataway. I just know he was the man I tied on that horse. I wonder, should I tell pappy?" He decided on silence.

Chapter IV

COW—ALL THE WAY THROUGH!

FOGS came after the all night rain. They settled everywhere filling the valleys and lying in floor-level strata across mesas and hills. Men, riding or walking, couldn't be seen a hundred yards away, and the steaming earth, worked on by the sun, sent up a humid breath which trapped sound and sent it willy nilly in false echo and magnification. It was a dangerous action to move about that war-infested country; but the cowmen and their hired gunmen moved just the same.

Texas hung about home with Toots. Pee Wee and the men under him scurried everywhere, establishing camps, packing out grub and ammunition. The rest of the country was divided and it was surprising how many friends the sheepmen had. In that immense commonwealth only three hundred heads of families lived. The sheriff and his lone deputy were powerless. Judge Terry had failed; the sheepmen notified him that the war would have to go on. They wouldn't take their sheep elsewhere; they had a government right to that grass, and feed that summer and fall they would, come what might. Hi Jedrow's killing had forever put peace out of mind. Days went by. The killing was unsolved.

Then one day the sun sailed up, clear, white, hot. Texas was rehearsing the pony in packing the effigy of Pee Wee from the barns to Old Abraham; then it happened, just as he thought it would. The lookout on Dead Man's Ridge suddenly made his appearance. Through his glasses Texas saw that a lone sentinel was watching the Bear Paw. It was morning, just a little after Pee Wee and his boys had started for the high feed-grounds where they had established a

battle ground, and where they were preparing to resist the passage of the sheep from the flats to the feed grounds in the hills.

"Toots, come here," yelled Texas from the barn.

"Son, what's up?" asked Toots as he approached the boy.

"Can you see my gun?"

"What gun? I can't see no gun."

"I got her stuffed inside my overalls and slung from my shoulder. I'm makin' for Old Abraham."

"What you got this pony saddled up for, Texas?"

"You tie on that dummy of my pappy and when you hear my whistle you send old Jim to me. Now's the thing I've been layin' for. If them sheepmen wants to be angels I'm goin' to accommodate 'em. There's a lookout on the ridge."

"You can't hit a man that far, son."

"I sure can bust a tug tryin', old hand. Now rig up the pony, make that dummy natural-like, and wait for my sign. So long."

NONCHALANTLY Texas walked toward the large cluster of rocks. He carried a pick as though he were about to do some manner of work. Reaching the rocks he climbed to his well hidden perch and squinting through the telescope on his rifle located a sheepman hidden back of a cleft rock. Minutely the boy studied that covert. Every phase of the rocks round about the sentinel he marked clearly; then he estimated the distance. He set his sights for five hundred and fifty yards.

From his position in the top of Old Abraham he could see the crest of Dead Man's Ridge for a considerable distance. And this he searched. The lookout was alone up there. Very clearly, at times, Texas could see the man's form, could make out every color of his hat, shirt, pants and vest. Anger and revulsion stirred him. He felt savage.

Then he emitted his low whistle, cupping his hands to confine it directly back to the house. He saw old Jim round the barn, saw the pony start toward him, and noted how very familiar the figure on its back, that roly-poly effigy, seemed to him. Surely, at a glance, one would have thought Pee Wee Slade was riding that spotted pony.

Texas swung his eyes toward the lookout. A rifle was shoved out from the man's hiding place, the sunlight smacking and glancing from its short barrel. On came the pony. Now it was halfway to the rocks; and just when it was within fifty yards of Old Abraham a spurt of white smoke darted from the lookout's station. A flick of dust spit up in front of old Jim.

Texas saw the sheepman work another shell into the chamber of his rifle; then the boy took a long, careful bead, fixed the cross-webs in the telescope on the herder and just as the man arose to get a better aim at the rider on the pony, Texas pulled the trigger. His bullet went home, he saw that. He joyed as he watched the man roll out from behind his covert, thrilled as the fellow struggled to his feet and started to the rear of the rock. Then the herder fell, got up, stumbled to a cluster of rocks, led out a horse, and painfully climbed into the saddle. Texas waited for no more. Down the rocks he scrambled, caught old Jim, leaped back of the hay-stuffed dummy and galloped to the barn.

"I got that centipede, Toots," he exclaimed.

"I saw you, kid, that was a dead-center shot. I saw that gazebo when he stumbled to his feet. You must have hit him bad; else he wouldn't have floundered so when he got up. No leg or arm smack, that! You got him in some vital spot. Now I gotta notify Pee Wee. You stay here while I ride and let your pappy know what you done. This will stir up hell, fast. It'll set them sheepmen hog wild and they'll be over on this place *pronto,* to burn us out. They know we're alone. You oughtn't done that!" Toots saddled a horse and raced to find Pee Wee.

After Toots had gone Texas was struck by the thought that the lookout might be only wounded, and suffering. He rushed to the barn, pulled the dummy from old Jim, led him out, and swinging into the saddle sent him across the bottoms, fast. He climbed the ridge, found the hiding place where the sheepherder had been shot and there noted spots of blood. These he followed to a group of rocks where the man had fallen into his saddle.

Tracing the tracks of the horse ahead Texas wound over the ridge and down into the thickets of pear and greasewood

on the flats below. And there under a hackberry tree he saw the huddled figure of a man. Dismounting he knelt beside the slumped shape and turned it over, holding the upper body in his arms, the face turned upward. The man's eyes opened, widened, as they took in the face of Texas. The lips parted, a smile struggled across them.

The man was trying to talk; and his eyes were strangely filling with some kind of intelligence which wished to impart itself to the boy. That look! It recalled the same thing to Texas that he had seen in the eyes of that man he had found in the rain—Hiram Jedrow.

"Can't you talk?" asked Texas. The eyes said no.

"Where you hit?" The eyes tried to tell.

Then Texas saw a stream of gore oozing from a hole in the injured man's shirt; under the right arm, high up.

"Which way is your camp?" The eyes twisted to the south. Then up came a saddled horse. Obviously this belonged to the man. The saddle was bloody. Texas laid back the man's head and fetched the horse. Then he picked up the herder. He was stirred by an overpowering pity for him.

Exerting immense effort Texas dropped the man into the saddle from a rock. There he held him, after whistling old Jim to him, and started off toward where he saw some streams of smoke ascending to the sky from the top of Horse Thief Mesa.

Passing through a prickly-pear thicket Texas came upon three vicious-looking herders; they were sitting as he came in sight; but jumped up and crowded around him. A short distance away were three wagons. The men belonged to these. Texas was about to turn away as one of the men relieved him of his position and held the wounded man in the saddle; but when the boy was about to step into his stirrup the wounded man's eyes conveyed a stop order to one of the trio.

"Hi buddie, wait a minute! I reckon you better come along with us," a low, drawling voice said, viciously.

"I found this *hombre,* got him on a horse, and delivered him to you boys. Now you want to hold me. You sure are sheepherders. This is a *baa baa* trick, right. I'm goin' back home."

"You're goin' where I say you will, sonny. Who are you?"

"Who are you babies? I belongs on this here ground. You don't." Then he noted that each of the men wore two guns, and these hung low down on their hips. These, then, were killers; men hired to protect the sheep and do the fighting for the flockmasters. "He's hurt so bad he can't even whisper," said Texas, indicating the man on the horse. "Why don't you boys let me go and get him somewhere, quick?"

"Gimme that pony!" one of the men tore the reins out of Texas' hands. "Get along or I'll slap you outa them boots. We knows you. You're Pee Wee's kid," said the man shoving Texas.

Texas staggered ahead and would have fallen had not one of the men stopped him. It was but the work of a moment to carry the wounded man to a wagon and lift him into it. This action caused him to faint. Texas was told to jump in beside him and when he was seated the wagons moved toward the mesa.

THIS table land was renowned all over the country. Once, many years before, it had been the rendezvous of famous Indian and Mexican horse thieves; hence its name, Horse Thief Mesa. Only one road led to its top. A dozen men there could successfully resist the assault of an army.

Slowly the wagon crawled the steep trail and as it went Texas looked about him at the desert. He discerned black blotches, here and there, and knew these to be dirty sheep feeding on the fresh grass which had sprung up with the rainfall; as far as his eyes could see these hideous centers of browns, grays and black seemed to dot the wastelands. Then came the top. Herders crowded about the wagon. One of these cried out as he poked his head over the tail-gate.

Then he cried. "Hi, everybody, Pete Jedrow has been shot!" Texas seemed to wilt. So, this was a Jedrow! Another Jedrow!

"Kid, how come you in that wagon?" asked the man on the ground. Texas made no reply.

"He was bringin' him here on a horse. I ain't had time to ask him much," offered the herder who had shoved Texas. "Pete hasn't said a word. We don't know how he got shot."

"Kid, where'd you find Pete?"

Then Texas filled with a surging recklessness. "I shot him," he said. "He was a-layin' up on the ridge waitin' to get a crack at my pappy. I rigged up a dummy outa gunny sacks stuffed with hay. I stuck my dad's vest and fancy pants and hat on this dummy and tied the whole kaboodle to that spotted pony, pappy used to ride. Then when I was all set in a high cluster of rocks, and I seen this wounded herder on the cliff, I whistled for the pony and here he come. Bam! this feller cracked down on Pee Wee as he thought, and I beelined my telescope sights on him and let him have a forty-four slug. It was a good five hundred and fifty yard target; but I sure got me a bull's eye. Now I'd like to know what you centipedes gotta say about that!"

"Hiram was shot by Pee Wee or his men. And his horse brings him home, tied to the saddle. Now Pete gets shot. Funny business!"

"I tied Hiram to that bronc. And Pee Wee didn't kill him. Somebody else done that. Pee Wee was a mile and a half away when that shootin' come off."

"Tst! Tst!" sounded the man through his clenched teeth.

"Meanin' which?" asked Texas.

"You poor little pilgrim," said the herder, staring strangely at Texas." Don't you know Hiram Jedrow was your blood and bone father? And that you shot your own uncle when you shot Pete, here? Don't you know them things?"

"You're a liar!" yelled Texas. "There's no sheepherder blood in my veins. I'm cow, I am! All the way through—*cow!*"

Chapter V

BITTER HOURS

AFTER that outburst and the silence which trailed it like an echo Texas stared about him bitterly. At a sinister nod, which he took as a command, the boy climbed out of the wagon and walked to a small adobe the door of which stood open. Into this he went and heard its creaking hinges close back of him. He walked to a slit which served as a window and stared out. He saw men carrying Pete Jedrow from the wagon; noted many sheep hides hanging to drying-frames; saw much litter of camp duffle; noted the disarray of harness, wagons, saddles, cooking outfits, piles of mesquite, and under tarps many boxes of ammunition.

It seemed to Texas that he was staring at what was a permanent and well equipped camp capable of taking care of a large number of men. His heart sank, and his troubled mind filled with bitterness. Over and over like an omen he heard the echo of that man's amazing words. "You poor little pilgrim. Don't you know that Hiram Jedrow was your blood and bone father? And that you shot your own uncle?"

What if these things were true? What was to become of him?

A bustle outside his door told him new comers were riding onto the mesa. Time fled, leaving the boy in a chaos of ugly musing. He lost himself in brooding. After a while the door opened and a pan of food was shoved in with a boot; the door closed. Texas nibbled at the stuff on the plate. He knew the meat was lamb. It had a sickening effect, and he shoved it away in disgust. The sun climbed the heavens, began to fall. Then came footsteps outside the house, the door was flung wide and the same man who had led him to the adobe appeared.

"Son, my name is Harley, Harley McAfee. I'm Pete's buddy, and I was a great friend of your daddy's, Hi Jedrow," he said.

Texas stared at him, viciously; heard him continue, and is seemed that the drone of that voice was like words coming to him from a great distance.

"We aims to keep you penned up a while; but you're among friends, and we don't intend to hurt you. Just calm yourself."

THEN Texas roused. "Tell me, did you mean what you said when you stood by the brake-block to that wagon? I mean about my father, and uncle?"

"Yes. Pete was your uncle. Hi was your daddy. Your mother died when you was less'n a year old. Hiram farmed you out to a French Canuck woman up in Montana, where all of us was, them days, until you was two; then he brung you down into this country. There was a big fight and the sheepmen had to abandon their camp. It was dangerous,

them days, for a sheepman to go any wheres near Jimtown.

"Pee Wee and his gang sneaked up on our wagons and was burning them when they run across you. Pee Wee took you and adopted you. Hiram and none of us never knew what had become of you until five years later when we come back here to feed and lamb a big bunch of sheep. Then we found out. Pee Wee wouldn't give you up, and none of us got a look at you.

"Because you was doin' well, and was healthy, Hiram didn't try to get you; but he did later, and near got killed for his pains. Cowmen started to smoke us out of Jimtown when Hiram hired a lawyer and tried to get Judge Terry to re-open that adoption case. That time all of us swore we'd get Pee Wee for what he done. Now we're strong enough and was goin' to shoot it out with the cowmen, take you by force, and after the summer carry you back to Montana. Are you sorry son, that you've come back to your kinfolks?"

No answer.

"It's a cryin' shame the way cowmen have turned you against sheep. They ain't nothin' wrong with gentle, pretty sheep, sonny?"

"The man you says is my daddy run off and left me, didn't he?"

"We was outsmarted and outnumbered. We had to skeedaddle. Pee Wee worked his men around west of our camp, started a stampede of the sheep to the east, and when we went to save the sheep the big bunch loped down on our wagons and sure made a mess of them. You was sleepin', that time, and Pee Wee carried you off on his saddle."

"Did Pete and Hiram Jedrow own all these sheep?"

"No, we all works for the Deer Lodge Sheep Co. That's a big combine of Montana men. You'll see the bossman pretty soon. He's comin' to the mesa now. His name's Gamaliel Crow. And he's sure salty. But he'll tell you what I told you."

"Did Pee Wee have a talk with him the day Hiram Jedrow was killed?"

"Yes. Gamaliel sure told him what he intended to do. And Pee Wee swore he never would give you up. Gamaliel offered to pay a thousand gold for your keep, all these years; but Pee Wee said he wouldn't take five times that much. Then Pee Wee killed your pappy. He thought he was fixin' things so's nobody would have a right to go to law—not a kinfolks' right, I mean."

"Pee Wee didn't kill Hiram Jedrow. I tells you I saw Pee Wee headin' one way, at the same time I heard a fella signal Hiram Jedrow. Why, I got the proof Pee Wee didn't kill Hiram." He was about to reach into his overalls and bring out the concha he had found near the scene of Hiram Jedrow's killing; but some urge made him desist. Harley, watching his eyes, must have detected this flash.

"Go on," he said. "Whatta you mean?"

"I said I seen Pee Wee headin' one way just before the time I heard two horses come together, walk off, and after this heard two shots. Pee Wee nor none of his hands could have backtracked fast enough to have done that butcherin'. And Hiram Jedrow done his level-best to try to tell me somethin', just before he died. I seen it in his eyes. Just like I seen Pete tryin' to talk to me when I come up to him."

"Pete's come to. He's going to make it, too. We've a to-do doctor in camp, a sheepman, and he says all Pete's got to do is keep quiet, eat a lot and get his blood back. You shot him completely through the upper chest. Just missed the top of the lung, and caused him to bleed a lot; but he's goin' to make it."

"And you boys won't let me go back to Pee Wee?"

"Not for a few days, at least. You're almost a man, now. If, after you've seen how we works, and met all of us, you wants to leave your kinfolks, then you can go; but Pee Wee done you dirt, done Hiram dirt, killed lots of men, butchered lots of sheep at lambin'time, and sure packed us grief a-plenty. If when you knows all these things you wants to leave your own people, then you can go. Nobody will stop you, or hate you either.

But if you wants to stay with us we won't allow Pee Wee, Jimtown nor all the cowmen in this desert to take you away. We've plenty men with us, now, plenty. You ain't seen nothin' yet. And we're just waitin' till we gets a big bunch of Mexican *vaqueros* from over the Border; then we're goin' to clean up Pee Wee and all his gang. This summer we feeds our sheep in the hills, and what I means is, we feeds 'em. But

since we got you peaceable, we won't start the ball rollin' unless Pee Wee opens the scrap. We intended to pack him grief, double, but now that you're here we'll go along easy."

"If I returns to Pee Wee you fights, eh?"

"Maybe. But not if you don't like us and don't want to trust them as took care of you when you was a little-bittie fella. Look here, Texas, look at this picture. It's one your pappy, Hiram, had took of you in Salt Lake City when you was two-and-a-half years old. Pete told me to show this to you."

TEXAS received a faded tin-type. He saw a little shaver clutching the fingers of a tall, wide hatted, heavily armed man and recognised the man as the one he had tied upon the back of the horse that rainy day. He stared at himself. Yes, no mistaking the shock of red hair, the slant of the eyes, the pucker of the little mouth. He knew he was looking at his own face. He handed back the picture. Harley shoved it back at him.

"You keep it," the sheepman said. "It was all your daddy had to remind him of you, but I think you ought to have it. Pee Wee burnt up or stole all the other baby things Hiram had, that time Pee Wee kidnapped you and burnt our wagons. Read what's on the back of that tin-type." Texas turned the photo over and read these words, "*Hiram Jedrow and his boy, Gerry, taken at Salt Lake City when Gerry was two-years-and-a-half old.*

Something mellow filled the boy, his eyes swam, he studied the face of the tall man. When he looked at Harley his lower lip was trembling, his face had blanched; he couldn't talk.

"Texas," said Harley soberly, "you do some thinking and let me know later. If you wants to stay we'll sure, all of us, be happy. It seems to me I wouldn't want for to go back to the man who killed my own pappy. If Pee Wee didn't do it his ownself, then he had it done by some mink of a cowboy. You'll get plenty cowboy roughage, if you stays with us. Wait till our ewes begin to drop their lambs. Then you'll see Pee Wee and his gang as us fellows knows 'em to be."

"What'll they try to do?"

"Stampede the sheep and kill 'em by the hundreds. They're gettin' all set to do this now. We ain't asleep. Here comes Gamaliel Crow. I got to meet him. You do some thinking."

Harley left the adobe and closed and locked its door.

Standing by the six-inch slit which acted as a window, Texas stared at the picture. A flood of emotion rose in him. Hiram Jedrow had a good face, a wide fine brow, a good square eye, a firm jutting jaw. Texas liked his looks. He stuffed the tin-type into a shirt pocket. To accommodate the photo he had to remove his harmonica. The small tin contrivance arose, touched his lips, and a sound came from it. In his abstraction he had blown the first few bars of "*The Midnight Express*".

He shoved the mouth organ into a pants' pocket. His fingers touched the silver concha. And he was staring at this when he saw a giant of a man step out of a saddle and walk to Harley McAfee. What a man! What a big, outstanding man! He looked like a picture Texas had once seen. A picture of a man in the bible called Moses.

CHAPTER VI

TEXAS TURNS HERDER

UP THE mesa bounded a streak of black and white as Texas stared at Crow and Harley. The boy's heart nearly choked him at the sight. His shrill whistle rent the air. Then he screamed through the window.

"Harley, that's my dog, Gingerbread, coming this way! Let him at me, willya?"

Harley turned, looked at Texas, said something to the white-bearded man he was conversing with, then as Gingerbread headed for Texas' adobe Harley hurried to it and flung wide its door. Gingerbread leaped into the boy's arms.

The door slammed, and the whining half-cries of the dog were as near human talk as animals can utter. Texas hugged his terrier to his breast. After he calmed he held the dog to the window. Gingerbread's nostrils were working furiously; his ears were stiffly cocked; his eyes roamed everywhere. As the dog centered his attention on the bloody hides drying on their rack a deep rumble of growls issued from his throat. Texas patted him as he said.

"Gingerbread, you musn't do that, son. I and you is sheepmen, now. We sure is. I belongs to this damn outfit. I was sired by a sheepman, and I reckon the only thing for me to do is to stick with 'em. It sure is tough, this smell, but you gotta get used to it." Gingerbread's voice stilled; his stubby tail beat a tattoo against the boy's ribs.

Crow and McAfee walked out of the boy's vision. And shortly afterward a dozen or more herders moved their horses down the trail. Texas, watching at his window, saw them appear on the desert and work rapidly toward the Bear Paw. Where were they going? He studied them until he saw them vanish in the shadows of Dead Man's Ridge. Then came a rattle on his door. It was flung wide. Gamaliel Crow entered the adobe.

"My boy," he said, "this is a sad home-coming for you. There must be gall, bitter gall, in your cup of sorrow. I have seen your uncle, and have learned that it was you who shot him. I'm in charge here, and I want you to know that my business is running sheep for my employers. I want to follow my trade in a peaceful manner. I'm a Christian man, and abhor war. But I'm a just man. Harley tells me that he has informed you of how Pee Wee Slade stole you from your father and took advantage of the sheep and cowmen's war to adopt you. The other day I offered to repay him for any loss of money because of his care for you. I met him and his men and tried to talk sense to him."

"I was watchin' you that time. I had followed Pee Wee and was sittin' on a high knoll and I seen you and your men meet and talk with Pee Wee and his boys. That's how I knows Pee Wee didn't kill Hi——!"

"Your father."

"Yes, sir. Kill my father. It was some other fella. Seems like, mister, the killer had arranged that meeting. He sent a signal, and my father answered that in the cry of a desert owl. Then their horses went away from my hidin' place and I heard two shots, hurried up and found a man dyin'. I lifted him to his horse, tied him on, slapped the bronc and rode home. When I got there Pee Wee and the boys had been back sometime. Pee Wee's not a bad fella, he ain't mister."

"There's good in all men, sonny. But he hasn't any right to keep you away from your kinfolks. Pete wants you. And it seems to me, since you shot Pete, near killed him, that you ought to stay with us till he gets well. Then we'll go to Jimtown, open up your adoption case, and try it legal."

"Judge Terry came over to see you, the other day. What did he want?"

"He tried to get us to move our sheep over into the Forlorn Mountains. I showed him we couldn't do this. The water don't last there; and the grass is all burnt out by the first of August."

"Didja speak to him about me, mister?"

"Yes. I told him how your father wanted you, now that you were nearly grown up. Judge Terry promised me to speak to Pee Wee. He and Hiram had a long talk. Judge Terry left this mesa having a very different idea about your adoption than he had when he arrived. Of course, I know he's a cowman judge; but he's honest, fair and square. I'm sure, if he has his way, everything will be done legal. It ain't as if Pee Wee wouldn't ever see you again. You and him could get together whenever you wanted to; but there's your Uncle Pete to think of now. And there's the dead man, your father, killed by the cowmen. Son, if you knows how to say a prayer you oughta take your trouble to the Lord, for answer."

Texas was on the point of tears. At last he gripped his dog. Then he blurted in a wild exclamation of overcharged emotion.

"Mister, I reckon you are right. I do belong to them as was friends of my blood and bone pappy. Pee Wee is all right, but blood is thicker than water. You don't have to worry. I'll stay with you boys, and as soon as I can I'll see Pee Wee and arrange so's you-all can feed your sheep on this grass till fall. I just knows he'll listen to me. Why, him and me is just thick as thick. He'll do anything for me, if he knows I honestly want it. I knows he will."

"Good, now come with me. Pete wants to see you."

PETE JEDROW lay on a makeshift bed in an adobe. His face was ghastly, and a rigid, feverish gleam dwelt in his eyes. He stared at the boy sullenly, silently, for a while; then

said, "Gamaliel, you told him, didja?"

"Yes," answered Gamaliel Crow. "And I made him see it your way. He has agreed to remain with us. He's a fine boy, Pete. Now, don't blame him for shooting you. He done what he thought was best. I've got a lot to do so I'll leave you together. Do you want Harley to stay here?"

"Yes, let Harley stay, a little while."

Texas looked up and smiled at Gamaliel. It seemed that a manner of sweetness had left the room when the old man walked from it. Pete's weak, racking voice jerked him out of his abstraction.

"Texas, you know your name is Gerry Jedrow, don't you?"

"Uh huh, but Pete, if you-all don't mind, just call me Texas. I wouldn't know much about Gerry, yet. How you feeling?"

"I'm gettin' better. Now, Texas, they's something about you that if you are my brother's son will soon prove it. Some folks have said that you ain't the boy Pee Wee stole from our wagons. But I knows a way to decide this, quick. Pull down your shirt on the left side. I wants to see a brand that's burnt there."

Now, the thing which had ever troubled him, Texas was about to learn. He jerked open his shirt and exposed his breast. Harly, who had been seated, placidly, near the door, sprang to the boy. Pete took one look, caught Harley's eyes and said, grimly, almost viciously.

"You see it, don't you? Twin hearts! What'd I tell you?"

Harley leered into Pete's eyes. A diabolical delight seemed to possess him. He leaned over the wounded man and whispered something inaudible to Texas; then he hurried from the room.

"Where's Harley goin'?" asked Texas.

"Just goin' to tell the people there ain't no mistake about who you are."

"What does that brand mean? And how come it on my hide?"

"One time, just when you was able to toddle around, up in Montana, your pappy was workin' for a horse ranch. They was brandin' saddle stock, a fine lot of riding horses; and here you come rompin' up to where they had a yearlin' colt down. Hiram stuck the iron on the shoulder of the horse, a little-bittie twin heart brand it was for use on fancy horses, and had hooked the iron in the crotch of an old apple tree in the shade of which they was working.

"Daggone, if you didn't fall agin that iron, and it burnt through your little shirt and seared the twin hearts on your skin. That's how come that thing there. And that's why I knows you're sure enough my brother's boy. You've got kinfolks still in Montana, and when I gets well I'm goin' to see that you are taken up to see your folks, women folks, as well as men folks. You can't stay down in this desert, alone with men, and grow up as ignorant as Pee Wee."

As Texas buttoned his shirt he peered a long while at Pete. It seemed the very face of the man had something evil, unkind in it; it seemed that it held none of the kindly magnetic qualities the boy had viewed in the tin-type image of Pete's brother Hiram. Instinctively, a loathing for Pete Jedrow came to birth in the boy at that very instant.

"You seen Hiram shot, Texas. Didja see who killed him?"

"No. And I ain't going to talk about that, no more. You lay still and not start that bleeding again. I'm gonna walk outside and look over what you got up here. Come on, Gingerbread." Pete smiled, a tired, feverish look came into his face, and he settled back on the pillow as Texas walked away.

UNDER a brush cover Harley McAfee was throwing a saddle on a horse. He seemed in a hurry, and frequently swung around to stare at Gamaliel Crow who was talking to a group of herders near a shack where two men were cooking a meal. When the horse was saddled Harley mounted it and darted away. Texas was the center of all eyes, but nobody spoke to him as he moved toward the head of the shelf trail. He watched Harley and saw him head directly into the northeast. And Harley was riding fast.

Later the boy walked to Gamaliel and said, "Mister, if you don't mind I'd like to know where my bronc is."

"He's in our corral, son. Over there you'll find him. Nice pony that, I was noticing him a while ago. Trick horse, isn't he."

"Yes sir. I and Pee Wee put a lot of time in on him. I'd like to ride with you, mister, when you go around this country. I know a whole heap about this desert."

Gamaliel smiled. "Very well," he said, "I'll take you. We're going tonight. I have an idea our ewes will lamb anytime now. And we'll guard them from this on until they do. I'll tell you about sheep, boy. And you'll like 'em, too. They're almost like children, sheep are. So gentle, so easy to handle, so easily frightened. Forty years I've been herding sheep, and no man loves 'em more'n I do."

"You sure got a tough job makin' me like sheep," said Texas. "Ever since I can remember they've been plumb poison to me."

But before morning Texas changed his mind. That night, early, a great commotion arose from the bottom of the shelf trail. Mexicans soon covered the mesa top. These were the swarthy peon type of half-Indian *vaqueros* from Sonora. Texas soon learned that Gamaliel Crow had arranged for them to aid him in his work that summer. Each was heavily armed and the band brought in with it a remuda of more than four hundred desert-bred, tough, down-necked mustangs. After the men and the horses had been fed Crow started with a huge cavalcade into the desert toward the bands of sheep.

Once in the broken-up country of the desert Gamaliel's various aides distributed themselves over the plain taking some of the Mexicans with them. Texas was told that these men were to ward off any attacks of the cattlemen.

Then the boy and Gamaliel rode up on the mesas where the ewes, heavy with lambs, were bedded down. The stillness of the night, the cud-chewing sheep, their pitiful sighing, the occasional blat of ewe or call of ram, set the boy's mind seething. He felt a growing fondness for the helpless creatures about him. There appeared to be thousands of them.

And the strange thing to him, standing above all else, was their apparent defencelessness. Not once did a single animal jump up in alarm, or for that matter, pay the least heed to the presence of the mounted men among them. They lay huddled in dense masses, everywhere. Once in a while a herder with a pair of dogs would appear out of the shadows, greet Gamaliel, squat down and watch him pass by.

It was nearly midnight when Crow and the boy worked their way back to Horse Thief Mesa. And there, by the light of an open fire, as Texas put away his pony, he saw Harley McAfee.

And talking to him was Blackie Hook.

TEXAS stopped, stunned by the sight of Blackie's face. Then he ambled to the fire, started past it, and was heading into the shadows between the adobes when Blackie overtook him and grabbing his arm swung him around.

"Kid, you whammed me over the head the other night. Don't forget that. I was just a-wantin' to get a look at that brand on your breast and you knocked the daylights out of me. If you want to stay whole you keep your mouth shut, around here, about that."

"Harley McAfee rode over and told you what he seen on me in Pete's house, didn't he?" snapped Texas.

"Yes. We've just got back."

"And that night I hit you you sent signals to the sheepmen, didn't you?"

"You bet. I'm workin' with Pete and Harley. Hiram, your daddy, was a pal of mine. I was tryin' to get his boy back for him. You got me in bad with Pee Wee by what you done."

"You double-crossin' skunk," snarled Texas. "Get away from me. Takin' a cowman's money and then playin' in with sheepmen! You're too derned low down for me to talk to."

"You keep your mouth shet, hear me? One blat outa you, and I'll see that you're fed to the buzzards."

"Go on, I wouldn't put it past you to salivate a boy. But let me tell *you* something. I'm keepin' my eye on you, after this. If you double-cross the outfit you're workin' for you'd turn agin the sheepmen. I intend to talk to my uncle about you. Why, you, yourself, roused the cowmen agin these herders!"

"Don't you worry. I'm sheepman to my toes. It was part of our scheme to have somebody among the cowmen who could tell every move they were goin' to make. I got myself that job."

"But I fixed it so's Pee Wee and the other cowmen don't trust you. Toots Malone woulda killed you, that night, if you had of batted an eye, or flicked one ear." Texas said with some pleasure.

Blackie laughed with that short jerk-

ing mirth which sounded like a wickedness to the boy.

"Of course Pee Wee's sore. He knew I knew *what he knew,* when you told him what I was trying to get a look at. That brand, Texas, put me in right, with just what I wanted to know. But if I'm out with the Bear Paw spread I'm sure in, right, with the rest of the cowmen. I sure am. And so these sheep are goin' to feed here this summer, cowboys, or no cowboys."

"I thought you was skeered the sheepmen would run off the beef cows you're holdin' for shipment east."

Again came Blackie's wicked mirth. Then he joined Harley at the fire. Texas walked to Gamaliel's cabin, knocked upon its door and when the old man gave him permission entered.

"Mister," he said, "will you allow me to have a six-gun and a belt? Pee Wee always let me pack a rod."

Gamaliel smiled.

"There's a lot on that wall. Pick what you want and cut down the belt so suit your belly. I'm twice your size, sonny."

A wild desire filled the boy to confess to Crow his fears about Blackie Hook. But once more that strange prompt of intuition sealed his lips. He chose a heavy forty-five, an old belt, and some shells, smiled good night to Crow and sought the adobe which Gamaliel had told him he was to occupy. With Gingerbread at his feet the boy went to sleep on a rough pallet of straw.

And over and over in his dreaming he saw the pathetic huddles of the helpless sheep and heard their sighs. And in his dreams he felt no abhorrence for them. He was a shepherd and liked it.

Chapter VII

HUMAN BRUTES

IT WAS Gingerbread whose stirring awoke Texas. And it was the terrier sniffing at the door who told him somebody was just outside. Texas slipped into his boots and heard a muffled conversation; one of the voices, he thought, was that of Blackie Hook. Tremulous, gun in hand, he stealthily reached the window and looked furtively outside. Then the mesa top broke into a bustling of voices; and the far desert became alive to spitting streaks of tiny flame.

Texas knew what occasioned these tongues of fire. He strained his ears and soon a vague *rat-a-tat-tat* told him of barking guns. The sight was thrilling. The night was black; but the stars told him morning was nearby. And Texas had lived too long in that desert not to know the rise and fall of familiar stars. Dawn *was* near.

On mesa tops where he had ridden the night before he caught little splashes of long, upflung fires. Signals! What was going on? He was about to fling open his door when Gamaliel called him. Hurrying out, Gingerbread ahead of him, he turned a face filled with excitement up to the old sheepman, who was lighting a cigarette.

"Our Mexicans have just caught the cowmen trying to steal a march on us," he said. We'll get going right away."

"What's them fires I seen on the tops of the mesas?"

"The first of the ewes are beginning to drop their lambs."

"And do you reckon them cowmen was aimin' to stampede the bunches while this was takin' place?"

"Texas, cowmen are ugly, when they want to be. We'll eat and then you ride out with me. I want you near me today."

While they ate, wagons rolled away, a string of them, carrying trained men to attend sick sheep and weakened lambs. And as the vehicles thundered down the narrow road, and while Texas was tying up his dog, he saw that morning fogs were hanging everywhere in the gigantic basin. Its swales, sinks, arroyos, tablelands, were screened or highlighted by these vapors. And here and there, like marionettes, he beheld dashing horsemen. Undoubtedly the sheepmen had repulsed the invasion of the cowboys. Soon the Mexicans signaled that they were coming in. Gamaliel ordered a man to form a relieving party. When this was on its way the old man and Texas rode off. Back of Gamaliel a herder led a pack horse.

"Pete's coming along, son. Didja see him this morning?"

"No sir. But I hope he's better."

"He is, but he's awful sore and says he's in pain. Why didn't you go to see him?"

"I don't like him. I can't tell you why, but I don't like him or Harley McAfee. Are you dead sure they are O. K.?"

"What makes you ask that, sonny?"

"I don't know. All my life I been a hunch hound. I gotta hunch you better keep one eye on both of 'em." He said no more.

UP RODE a herder who had been with the Mexicans the night before. His face was alive with excitement.

"Boss," he said, to Crow. "You was right. They tried to break through from the mountains down a lot of dry-creeks; but in them arroyos there's still some rain water and we heard the splashing of their ponies. When we opened fire they *vamos pronto*. We got some of 'em, too. One fella, they called him Gabby, was hit in the mouth. We heard 'em talkin' about that."

Gabby! Texas felt a stab of pain. Poor Gabby! Shot by the men Texas was now living with! The thought hurt him. He recalled the tenderness of Gabby and Toots; how both had nursed him when he had the measles and the mumps; how they taught him to ride a bucking horse; to rope; to make a honda; braid a square-knot; make a whip-lash; how to shoe a horse; how to tell where water was in the desert. He studied the face of Gamaliel and saw that the news of his aide had brought him no joy. "I'm sorry they hurt anybody," he said. Ordering the man to take his Mexicans to Horse Thief Mesa, feed and get them some rest, he gave orders for the deploying of his forces that coming night.

On further into the desert there struck into the boy's hearing a dismal sound. A blat it was as from a single throat; and yet he knew that thousands of sheep were making that one-note cry. It chilled and stilled him. He searched Gamaliel's face. The old, weather-stained countenance was immobile. The great eyes above the black beard were searching the mesas. Texas was too stirred to intrude. Finally Gamaliel spoke.

"I was hopin' they'd not start lambing this week; but here they are at it. That means that we'll be wore out, just when every man oughta be watching them cowboys. If the fight gets too hot, son, and I have to leave you, will you keep out of danger?"

"Yes, sir. I'll do what you say. I knows you want to do what's right; but I sure wish I could see my pappy—Pee Wee."

"We'll see him sooner than you think. See how the fogs is drifting?"

"Toward the Bear Paw. Yes sir."

"And the sound of them noisy sheep is being carried on that wind? Don't think the cowmen don't know what that means. Tonight we'll have a tough time. That's why I brought our camp along.

All morning they visited various bands of sheep. The information gleaned from the flock tenders was always the same. The south Utah sheep were lambing; the Montana ewes had not begun. The lamb crop looked well, and soon, in little huddles, the spindle-legged lambs were tottering about their mothers. Texas' heart went out to the weakened little creatures.

One or two he got his hands on and seemed to take a strange delight in hearing their plaintive small cries. Ewes stared at him with wide and stupid eyes. One old ram edged toward him menacingly. "Old-timer," Texas said, "I ain't aiming to hurt this little fella."

Gamaliel laughed. "Your first offense with sheep, eh?" he said.

"Yes sir; but they sure is cunnin', ain't they?"

Another bunch came, and another. Then the men made camp under a pinnacle rock on the flat top of a mesa. The selected spot was well chosen. It formed the center of the various mesas where the sheep were bedded and being watched; but Texas saw Gamaliel studying the far horizon with a pair of glasses.

"See something, mister?" he asked Crow.

"No, but I am looking. I don't want no considerable body of men to rush on us like that time they burned our wagons when you was a kid. They sure surprised me that time. And caught me plumb off my guard, and I was flat-footed and unable to do a thing. Want to look at the glasses? Adjust them with that little dingus right there. First one eye, then the other."

TEXAS focused the glasses and stared through them.

He knew the region over which he was looking; but as he gazed it suddenly lifted itself in a strange magnification. Ridge on ridge of the foothills dropped to the flat country where the

platoons of the mesas showed. Then he saw that out of those foothills a series of tablelands brush covered and hazy, rose tier upon tier to the lone mesas which appeared like islands in the sea of sand. And at one point it seemed to him that from those tablelands adjacent to the mountains, men could, under cover of darkness, quickly make their way unseen, down to the first of the mesas that rose from the flat country.

"You look right there," he said pointing to the spot he had been scrutinizing. "It seems to me if there is a rush that it'll come from that place." Gamaliel took the glasses.

"I can see all those mesas and their tops," he said. "No, Texas, I don't look for an attack that way. I can see everyplace, and we've a man or two out that way, anyhow."

"But, mister, what you think is the tops of those mesas is just the timber on the first of the foothills. I know you can't see those mesas, right well. You better do something about that, really."

Gamaliel smiled. Then patted the boy's shoulder. "You don't want these sheep hurt, do you?" he asked.

"If a man was to drive these sheep off this mesa, cowman, or whoever he was, I'd sure bog down tryin' to kill him. I think a man who would stampede mothers and lambs sure ain't fit to go around and call hisself a human."

Gamaliel liked that; and smiled as he turned to a herder and issued orders for supper to be prepared at once.

That night the sky was overcast. Heavy dews were falling and the stars showed wanly as through a grayish veil. The sheep were still; the night was without a sound. Far lights told of guard fires, and frequent pathetic cries issuing from the newly-born lambs soon lulled Texas to sleep.

He awoke suddenly. Gamaliel had kicked him.

"What is it?" asked Texas.

"They've come, son; just as you thought they would. Look!"

Toward the foothills there arose a fantastical sight. Skyrockets and roman candles were exploding in wide circular flights all along the mesas where the sheep were bedded. These were coming up from beneath the shoulders of the tablelands. The air seemed filled with the bursting colors which were dropping directly onto the sheep. Six of the smaller mesas were illumined in this baptism of fireworks; and without doubt the very tableland they were on would soon be visited by the same rockets. Then far to the east where the camps of the Mexicans lay there crackled a burst of rifle fire. Texas swung his eyes and watched the jets of astonishing flame spitting along the ridges and being answered from the secret places of the desert's border.

THEN, nearby, as if some signal had been given, the stilled, cud-chewing sheep all around him struggled to their feet. One bleat of fright from a far-off ram had sent the alarm. Skyrockets fell nearby, skidded along the ground leaving trails of illuminating sparks, and then burst. In the glare of that sudden light a wraithlike, hideous, flashing gray shape appeared. A wolf-hound! Texas knew the species at once. "Mister," he cried, "they've set the dogs on the sheep! I know that dog! It's one of a bunch that's owned by the same outfit Blackie Hook is foreman of! There's another!"

"Get under that rock, son."

"No, I'm goin' where you go. I've got a carbine. You needs me, and we sticks together. What'll we do?"

Gamaliel reached out, grasped the boy and flung him like an old boot beneath an overhanging rock. Texas was stunned; but conscious, as he lay, of some vast commotion just outside of his covert. He roused, struggled to his feet, picked up his gun and gaped at what he saw.

Dashing in a V-shaped mass, and heading directly for the precipitous edge of the mesa he saw several thousand sheep. They were being led by young rams. Ewes and little lambs were dropping, being trampled upon, blatting, screeching, calling, one to another; the thud of many moving hoofs sounded grewsomely together with the clash and scrape of horns.

And Texas heard the snarl, the quiet, killing, grunting cry of the pursuing dogs. He whipped a shell into his gun and shouted "Gamaliel!" as loudly as he could.

A rocket burst near him and he saw the sheep, like a dirty gray wave, hesitate, swell in the middle of its mass, some rams rising in the air on their

hind legs, then surge forward; straighten out, and go ahead, fast. He realized that the leaders of those frenzied woollies had come to the precipice, stopped, and then had been shoved over by the crowding animals behind.

On went the stampede, and from all sides came the flare of rockets and the snarling, pitiless sounds of attack from the wolf hounds. After a while a rifle barked ahead of him; then another and another. Men were coming up from both sides of the mesa. They were after the other bands of sheep. Suddenly the rockets ceased to explode; and the sounds that he had heard coming from the band which now had dropped over the mesa's brim, were being duplicated to his right. He started that way yelling, "Gamaliel! Gamaliel!"

"This way!" came back an answer. "Over here!"

"Is that you Texas?" came another voice from the shadows.

THAT voice!

Like the skyrockets that had broken over that mesa a devestating fury possessed the boy. All he could think of were the attacks of the dogs, the milling herds of the sheep falling over the rocks to their deaths on the desert below. And the man who had called his name was one of those who had sent those rockets and loosed the dogs.

"Yes, this is Texas! I know you, Toots Malone!" he cried in answer.

"Where are you, boy?"

There sounded a rush of feet close by.

"Don't you come where I can get a shot at you, Toots!"

"Does you mean that you would crack down on me?"

"Don't you come where I can see you. You dirty, lamb-killing, low-down whelps. All you are is a bunch of human brutes, all of you. And I mean Pee Wee the same as I do you!"

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned around to see the patriarchal head, its beard flowing in the soft wind, of Gamaliel Crow. By the wan light of the stars Texas reached for and found the hand of the old man.

"Down, sonny, down!" commanded Crow. "They're right over yonder. Down, boy! Till I gets me a shot at one of them."

Like a demon had gripped his mind Texas broke away and ran into the open. "Kill me, you pot hounds," he yelled. "Come on outa that brush and take a shot at me, any of you! You low-down skunks! I know who I am now. I'm the son of a sheepman, and right on this desert is where you got your paws on me first. Now come and get me! I doubledare any of you to show his face."

Only the sounds of the stampede and falling sheep, the cries of the lambs and rams and ewes came back as an answer.

Texas turned his head to see Gamaliel pumping his carbine as fast as he could work it. "There they go, Texas," he shouted, "off to the right. They've got the dogs with them. Somebody called those dogs. I distinctly heard a horn and the dogs stopped and ran away from the sheep. Did you say those hounds belonged to the outfit Blackie Hook is working for?"

"Yes, and what is more, mister, Blackie is a two-faced polecat. It was him as turned the country against your men; and last night he spent in your camp. I tells you, mister, there's dirty work right in your camp and among your own men."

THE air nearby stilled. But from the lower end of the mesa there arose the bleating of the sheep. Somehow, it seemed, the flock-masters and their dogs had reached the head of the sheep and were milling them in circles upon themselves. This was dangerous work, for the ewes and lambs, but it was better than permitting the sheep to crash to their doom in their blind stampede.

Gamaliel and Texas hurried to where some of the men from the floor of the desert were arriving on the top of the bedding-ground. From these they learned that two separate bands of marauders had come onto the mesa. The herders had viewed the rocket assault and had actually been able to see both sides of the mesa simultaneously. The dogs had gone up one side. Only men had scaled the other.

A manner of delight raced through Texas. Suppose Toots had not set those dogs on the sheep. Then what? He thought of Blackie Hook. And turned around to tell what he thought to Gamaliel. The old man was not in sight. He had hurried to his horse, and mounting

it was dashing from the mesa. A flock-master approached Texas.

"You're to follow me," he said. "The old man told me to look after you and see that you got safe back to Horse Thief Mesa. Come on, I've got your pony all saddled. We gotta ramble, boy. This desert is full of rifles and no man can tell which side he belongs to."

"Where's Gamaliel gone?" asked the boy.

"After the Mexicans and the biggest bunch of his gun-men. He's gone hog-wild, that ole man, and if ever I seen a hombre about to set out on a killing spree I seen it when he left me. His eyes was wild. Gamaliel Crow is goin' to abandon these sheep and never let them cowmen get set till he kills the last one of 'em. This night fixed him, right. I've known he was strong for salvation, psalm-singing and reading the scripture, but he's full of killer stuff from this out. They prodded him too far."

Texas followed his conductor meekly. They loped off the mesa and set their faces toward the sheep camp. Here they arrived after midnight and found nothing but a small-guard covering the shelf trail.

By a camp fire, close to the first corral, hanging across a hitch-pole, Texas caught sight of a pair of bat-wing brown leather chaps. A gleaming of spangles met his sight. Putting old Jim away he casually walked to the chaps and examined them by the fire. They were adorned with silver conchas. One of these, on a right-leg wing, was missing. And each concha bore the identical design of the one he was even then fingering in his pants pocket. His jaws clamped hard.

Chapter VIII

Pete Jedrow Talks

LIKE a galvanic shock bitter comprehension flooded Texas' being. The man who owned those chaparejos had been the murderer of Hiram Jedrow! There, around that corral, the killer of his father had sat. He had hung those chaps on the hitch-pole. Where was that man now? Texas strolled over to the head of the shelf trail.

"Whose chaps are those hanging to that hitch-pole?" he asked one of the guards.

"I dunno. Take 'em, if you want 'em, kid."

He asked another man. No one knew. All of them were staring down upon the desert. It seemed that a drama, most amazing and intense with a grave and menacing suspense, was being enacted out in the sands.

"Take anything you want, Texas," growled a man. "Most any time I figures we'll know which is which. We can't tell how the scrapping is going."

Texas lifted his eyes and saw what the man had meant. In a large semi-circle the flashes of rifles could be seen. These were savage, intermittent; and they never repeated themselves from the same region. The line of fire was wavering, back and forth, in and out, across the broken and water-washed surface of the plain.

But this spectacle did not stir the boy. His mind was savage with the hurtling craving to discover the owner of those leather riding pants. Then he thought of Pete Jedrow. Securing the chaps he carried them to Pete's *adobe*, entered, lighted a lantern, and when he turned to the bed Pete was staring at him.

"Whose chaps are these?" he asked, fiercely.

"Why, let me see, has they silver conchas on 'em engraved with a long-horn's head?"

"Yes, just like this one," and Texas drew forth the decoration he had found at the scene of Hi Jedrow's murder. "And lookit, Pete, there's a concha missing on these chaps. Don't you see, the fella who owns these chaps lost this concha? There's still the worn-out whang-leather tie-strings what held that concha to the wing of the right leg."

"Where'd you find that concha, Texas?"

"You porcupine, you're worse'n a coyote eatin' its own pups. The man who owned them chaps killed your brother and my father. I picked that silver shell up beside Hi Jedrow's body."

Pete lifted himself on an elbow. His face blanched; he tried to say something; but only a vicious snarl came from his throat. It was more like a dog's growl than a human note.

"Texas, you go get some kind of wagon hitched up. I wants you to drive me to Jimtown," he said.

"Not a drive. I sees you knows whose

these chaps are, and I'll sure feed your teeth to your stomach if you don't tell me," he whipped out his gun. "Tell me, or I'll bend this rod over your head. Any minute them cowmen may come bustin' up on this mesa. The sheep is all scattered, Gamaliel is gone after the cowmen, and it sure looks to me as if the cowboys has got crooked guys right on this mesa. I ain't takin' no chances. You tells me whose chaps these are."

"Blackie Hook's. Don't you worry, son. I'm fed up with what I been doin'. I'm one of them as has been double-crossing Gamaliel. And if you hadn't whammed me with that bullet I'd been out there now helping Blackie do the dirtiest job a man ever done to somebody he called a friend."

"I ain't no fortune teller. Spit out what you mean in a good brand of runnin' talk."

BLACKIE HOOK is a sheep thief and a cow rustler. And for a long time has been runnin' a gang south of the Border. Years ago him me, and Hiram Jedrow worked together stealin' horses and cows in Montana. More'n a year ago Blackie came north, hunted Hi and me up and laid a plot before us to steal a big bunch of white face cows down here. He said he was going to get the job of foreman for the outfit he aimed to skin. And he did. When this was done he wrote Hi and me and we got Gamaliel all steamed up to make another try at summer-feedin' down here. We told him we'd arrange Mexican sheepmen to help protect the sheep. The old man fell for that scheme and sent me down to settle things. It was easy. When all was fixed, and most of Blackie's gang was gathered up, Gamaliel started the drive down here."

"Then you intended to bring on war, eh?"

"Yes, just that; and when all was set them Mexicans was to run off the cows for the outfit Blackie worked for. His owners was in the East, and he had been cuttin' out his best beef grades and holding 'em on a feed-ground that was fenced. Just when he give the signal them Mexicans would drive off the beef and let the sheep under Gamaliel go to the devil. The cow and sheep war would keep all hands busy."

"And you figured on gettin' me and taking me with you, didja?"

"Yes."

"And was my pappy in on this. too?"

"Yes. But since Blackie killed him I gotta hunch that Hi Jedrow just couldn't go through with such a dirty scheme and that he told Blackie so. Then Blackie butchered him."

"Was everything all fixed to stampede the sheep last night?"

"Yes. Did they do it?"

"I should say they did. They used that string of coyote and wolf dogs Blackie's spread has. And they shot rockets over the mesa top and scattered the sheep. Was that the scheme?"

"Exactly. Blackie figured when that was done that Gamaliel would start after the cattlemen. Blackie would then fall in with the cowmen, try to lead them up into the high hills, the sheepmen chasin' them, and when all was set, just so, the Mexicans would desert Gamaliel, drive off the white-faces and head for Mexico. There you have it all. Get me a wagon and take me to Jimtown. I wants to get inside a jail, talk to a judge or a sheriff, and keep from gettin' hung. Will you do this for me, Texas?"

"And Harley McAfee was workin' with you boys, eh?"

"Right! Get goin', Texas, let's get outa here. If I don't tell them cowboys what a double-crossin' mink Blackie Hook is, there's no telling how many men will be salivated. Don't you see we gotta move? Thay ain't a minute to spare."

"Are any of these herders on this mesa pals of you and Blackie?"

"Not a one. McAfee, Blackie, Hi and me was the only ones."

"How come Blackie used to visit here? And why didn't Gamaliel suspect something wrong with a cowman who would associate with a sheepman who was runnin' woollies on the grass where he was feeding his cows? Just tell me that."

"Blackie told Gamaliel that he was goin' to be neutral. His corporation is also in the sheep business out beyond the Ghost Mountains. And Blackie convinced Gamaliel that he wanted the cowmen taught a lesson so his outfit could run some sheep down here, too. Gamaliel never thought wrong about Blackie."

Texas had listened long enough. He carried the chaps outside, slung them on a light wagon and hitched up a fast team. He tied old Jim behind, lifted Gingerbread to the seat, and with the aid of two of the trail-guard placed Pete on a bed in the wagon.

JIMTOWN was stirring with a frenzy of excitement when Texas entered it. Stopping the wagon in its outskirts the boy hastened to Judge Terry and told his tale. Pete was lodged secretly in jail. A courier was sent on a fast horse to notify Pee Wee Slade and his associates of the impending danger to the beef cows of the outfit Blackie worked for.

Then the sheriff, Judge Terry, and Texas went to breakfast.

As they were finishing their meal the sheriff, staring from the window, exclaimed, "Looka yonder! There's Blackie Hook, right now. And he's got a mob with him. That son of a gun is sure fixin' a alibi for himself."

There he was, Blackie! Just dropping out of a saddle before The Coney Island Exchange, a saloon and gambling hall which had been, once upon a time, a Mexican dance hall. Its walls were of adobe, three feet thick; its doors were of heavy iron-wood; its roof was heavily timbered, overlaid with corrugated iron. The place was truly a fortress.

"I'm thinking," said Judge Terry, "that Blackie's presence in Jimtown sure gums us up. We can't get him, can we, sheriff?"

"No, sir! They ain't a handful of fightin' men in this town. Blackie just rode up with them hard-boiled punchers of his and they must be two dozen of them. Good Lord, here comes some more. These are Mexicans!"

Down the street jangled a column of *vaqueros*. They were singing. The sheriff's face was a blank.

"It's a cinch," he said, "that them Mexicans have rode off from Gamaliel. And what I'm fearing is that the cowmen will kill off the sheep herders before we can get to 'em. What oughta be done is to have Pee Wee Slade bring his boys to town and fight this thing out with Blackie in the streets. That messenger I sent to Blackie will only help to make Pee Wee and his pardners go into the hills farther." As he concluded he caught and held Texas' eyes.

"I ain't bogged-down in this chair, Mister Sheriff," smiled the boy. "Tell me what you want, and I'll get to Pee Wee on my pony. You won't need to build no fire under that bronc to make him leave town. What'll I say to Pee Wee?"

A side door flung open. In rushed one of the sheriff's deputies, an old man, who was under-sheriff.

"Somebody must have seen Pete Jedrow brought into jail," he cried. "There was two fellows just called on me and wanted to know what Pete was bein' held for."

"What'd you tell 'em?" asked the sheriff.

"I told 'em Gamaliel Crow had sent him here to be held."

"Good! Now, Texas, you beat it for Pee Wee."

"Wait," said the under-sheriff. "That kid can't get outa this town. Them fellers what called on me asked me where Texas was. I smelled a mouse and strung them along by sayin' the boy was asleep at the hotel. All streets is watched."

A TALL, thin, Mexican woman, one of the café's helpers, walked in from the rear with a pan of green-beans which she proceeded to string. Texas took a look at her. A mischievous twinkle appeared in his eyes.

"Sheriff, if you could get that dress and that sun-bonnet off that old sliver-built gal I sure could make a try for my pony. Dressed in her clothes and I'd look like a cross between a hen-bat and a female grass-hopper. I could walk down a alley lined with my friends and never a man would take a second look at me. I'll bet even the magpies knows that dress and that bonnet."

The sheriff was alongside of the woman in a bound. He conversed with her in Spanish. A gurgle of a laugh came from her as the sheriff jingled a coin and slipped it into her thin, tanned hand. Then she arose and, disappearing into the kitchen, came back with the dress and the sun-bonnet. Texas pulled off his boots and socks, slung these into a basket and piled the string-beans on top of them. Then he slipped the old mother-hubbard over his head, buttoned it up, changed the bonnet for his Stet-

son and stood up a miserable masquerade of the old crone who had worn that outfit so short a time before. She laughed outright at the boy.

"All right, what's the news for Pee Wee?" asked Texas.

"Tell him to come a-fanning and a-fogging and to bring along with him as many men as he can wrangle," said the Sheriff. "I'll have some kind of place for them to do their fighting in, when he gets here. And I'll have all the ammunition and guns in town corraled. Get out and hit the sunshine, kid. You're riding on the toughest job you ever punched leather for in your life."

"Hold my dog here ten minutes, willya, Sheriff? then let him go. He'll trail me outa town. So long, Judge!"

Texas opened the side door and simulating an old woman's gait disappeared up an alley. Across the street the men who had arrived with Blackie were lounging, laughing on the raised platform which served as an entrance to the Coney Island Exchange.

Judge Terry staring up the alley, through a side window, swung around at the sheriff and his assistant.

"That poor little jasper, Texas. If he really knew who and what he was I'm dead certain he'd be weeping this very minute, sheriff."

"Ain't you ever told him he was adopted?"

"Read that," responded the judge. "I just got that in answer to a wire I sent out by the stage the other day. That shows you who Texas is. I sure don't want to be among those present when Pee Wee and that boy parts company." He opened an envelope and flipped a letter across the table. Both of the officers read it.

"Holy mackerel!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Who'd ever thought that red-headed, slat-built, freckle-faced, twist-chewin' kid would turn out to be that kinda man. You're dead right. When he learns the truth he'll be as ga'nted down and peek-lookin' as a swarm of bees runnin' on alkali water. Whatta you goin' to do, Judge?"

A horn blew down the street; the signal that the last minute had come to get mail into the post-office before the morning stage left for the railroad. Judge Terry roused at the noise of the blast.

"Do?" he yelled. "I'm going to write me a telegram, give Keno Kelly, the stage driver, some coin, and have him send that message, today, when he gets to the railroad."

"Maybe I done wrong in asking that boy to ride. He might get killed. But, shucks, if Pee Wee suspects, he'll keep Texas at home and won't let him come back to this town. Suppose he was to get shot?" asked the sheriff.

"Just try to keep that boy out of this scrap," said the judge.

Chapter IX

SAVAGE RIDERS

AT LEAST thirty men were in the yard of the Bear Paw when Texas rode up, with Gingerbread on his hip, and hopped out of the saddle to spread the latest news of Jimtown. That Blackie was there threw the cowboys into a manner of baffled confusion. Texas stared about but did not see Pee Wee. Toots was there, though, and Gabby Gallagher with a dirty bandage around his face, only one eye showing out of this.

"Are you hurt bad, Gabby?" asked the boy.

"Is a fellow hurt bad who has now got two mouths that he's got to work?" snapped Toots. "It's sure hard on his audience, Texas. We most couldn't stand it before. But now, man! He'll jabber just like a leaky steam valve. Them sheepmen put a bullet through his lips, making two mouths outa one.

A gurgle of sound came from Gabby in reply.

Then came Pee Wee, riding up with a bunch of boys from distant ranches. Neither he nor Texas showed the joy which was possessing them. The old man heard what the boy had to tell him of his adventures, while the other cowboys stood around, silently staring, each filling with an emotion which evidenced itself in the manner with which they regarded the pair.

Then somebody turned toward Dead Man's Ridge.

"Lookit," the puncher yelled. "Look at them dern sheepmen! They're pouring down on our bottoms like ants! We gotta fight them crazy fools, before we can start to Jimtown."

Texas sprang into his saddle and was gone like a streak. In the van of the oncoming herders he had caught sight

of Gamaliel. Over his shoulder he cried, "Pappy Pee Wee, I'll settle this yere thing. You stay back, all you boys, and get your outfits ready!"

The galloping sheepmen spied Texas as he broke across the meadows. They halted. Gamaliel rode forward to meet him. And there, while both the Bear Paw and the sheepmen watched, the old herder and the boy talked, leaning toward each other out of their saddles. Gamaliel listened as Texas told him of finding the chaps, of the concha, and how Pete had confessed. But when Texas narrated the presence of Blackie Hook and a part of his crew in Jimtown Gamaliel Crow waited for no more. He swung about, lifted his great bulk in his stirrups and waved for his men to follow him. Side by side he rode with Texas up to the Bear Paw. Pee Wee met him and silently the two old men gazed into each other's eyes, and their hands met in a token of peace.

"Pee Wee," said Gamaliel, "detail one of your boys to ride with one of mine. I've got a lot of cowmen cornered up in the foot-hills. And now it seems that holding them there is just what Blackie figured I'd do. I was coming here to smoke you out, burn your spread, and then drive a slice between you cowmen and split you four ways from the Jack. We must notify the cowmen to protect the white face cattle of Blackie's bosses; then with some of my men, and them cowmen, we can carry the grief to the Mexican detachment which is laying off in the desert waiting for Blackie's sign to dash for the beef cattle. I'm going to Jimtown with you."

PEE WEE spoke to a cowboy who rode off with a sheepman. Then introductions were in order and cowboys met and fraternized with sheepherders while Pee Wee and Gamaliel talked over the best way of arriving in Jimtown with so large a body of men without giving Blackie an alarm. It was decided to ride around the town and come into it from the far side down a thickly covered creek bottom where the vegetation would act as a screen to conceal the movement of the riders until they were close enough to make a dash and reach the shelter of the baked-mud houses in its outer edges. From Pee Wee's storeroom the sheepmen were issued ammunition, tobacco and such supplies of an edible nature as each could take in his clothes.

When everything was ready for the getaway Pee Wee turned to Texas. "I wants a word with you, sonny, at the house." Texas knew what was coming; but he strolled into the house beside Pee Wee. Heronimus the lizard flashed across the kitchen floor and raced up the leg of Texas, a rapid fire of noise issuing from its throat.

"Sonny," said Pee Wee, "I reckon you knows I can't permit you to go back with us to Jimtown, don't you?"

"I feared just that." Texas decided that he wouldn't plead and thereby delay the ride to Jimtown; but his little mind was working with a savage intensity.

"I'm leaving Gabby here with you. In case any of the cowmen rides this way you send them into town. It'll all be over right soon, and then you and I gotta have a heart to heart talk. You knows now I ain't your real pappy, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," and to conceal the sweep of emotion which was attacking him, furiously, he pulled out the tin type Pete had given him. "That was me when I was between two and three," he said. "It was took in Salt Lake City."

"It looks like I seen you, over thirteen years ago, Texas. Let me take this with me, willya? I'll take good care of it."

"Sure, stick it in your pocket. Now, listen—*pappy*——!"

"Doggone, but that sounds good. Always think of me as pappy, willya?"

"When a fella has talked so much to another fella, and has lived with a fella like I have lived with you, why he gets so single-tracked on the same idea of that fella and walks in that self-same track so long that after while he gets so deep in it he can't look out. Pappy you was to me, pappy you is to me, pappy you will be to me, as long as I can spit at a crack. Now, you take keer yourself. And remember you're a right little old jasper and has the failing of all little-bittie men of sticking up your head to see what's goin' on. Keep your nut outa sight, pappy, and don't let them hombres bed down a bullet in you."

Pee Wee's eyes filled with tears. He gripped the boy's hand, patted his cheek, ran outside and without daring to look back rode swiftly away with Gamaliel at the head of the column. Gabby and

Texas watched the hard-riding mass of men until it disappeared over a shoulder of the hills; then Gabby turned around at Texas.

SOMETHING in the boy's face held Gabby's attention.

"You little weasel," he said in a thin, squeaky, difficult manner, "you're thinkin' of following them, ain't you? I can see it in your eyes."

"Follow 'em? Sure! Maybe I'll be in there ahead of them. Does you think I'd let my pappy go into a meat-gettin' jamboree like this without me at his side? Now you fly to the barn and get yourself a bronc. Gabby, I come outa Jimtown dressed like a woman; and I'm goin' back in calico the same way. I got ideas about this scrap. I sure have. You know them big fields of mesquite trees right on the edge of Jimtown?"

Uh huh. Where them Mexican women has all them bee hives?"

"That's it. Them trees is in bloom and them hives is full of honey-gatherin' bees. You never seen such a mess of working fools in your life. That's my idea."

"What you talkin' about? First, you coddle to sheepmen; then you wants to kill Toots and dares him to shoot at you; then you believes all us boys shot them rockets and turned loose them dogs, when all we was doing out in that desert was tryin' to get past the firin' line of them Mexicans so's Pee Wee, Toots or me could have a little *habla* with Gamaliel and find out somethin' about you. And now if you don't parade as a broke-down old maid spud-peeler and goes slanting off in a lotta wild talk about mesquite blossoms and bees! Boy, has you had a touch of the sun?"

"Come on, Heronimus, Gabby sure couldn't see a flock of barns tied to the tail of a kite. You knows what to do with bees, don't you Heronimus?"

Texas hurried to the house where he stuffed his pockets full of a strange collection of objects taken from the shelves of the storeroom. And the last article he picked up was a coil of fuse. This he tied around his neck, after removing his coat, and swinging it back of him donned his coat, completely hiding it. He made a parcel of giant powder and number two fulminating caps and with this and his rifle hurried outside, Heronimus on his shoulder, Gingerbread trotting ahead of him.

After the horses had been fed, he and Gabby set out for Jimtown. Gabby was in pain; but he knew his Texas, and realized that if he did not humor him that the boy might gallop into Jimtown and be killed. Gabby had no intention of allowing Texas to get anywhere near the fighting.

THERE it twinkled like a flock of fireflies. Jimtown! Gabby and Texas saw the tiny square of lights as they topped the last rise which fell away to the depression in which Jimtown nestled. To ride into the village would now be an easy matter, provided they could approach that side where Pee Wee and Gamaliel's men were located. Gabby decided, as they reached the flat country, to house the boy in the adobe of some Mexican in the outskirts and ride in alone to reconnoiter. With this idea Texas fell in at once. Here were the very houses he wanted to investigate. They had a bite to eat and while devouring a pan of frijoles and some Mexican chicken they learned that Pee Wee and his men had successfully entered the village from its opposite side. Up to this time, so the Mexicans reported, there had been no gun fire. Blackie and his men were drinking heavily and swaggering about the streets; but not one of them had commited an overt act.

Tat! Tat! tatta! tat!

A muffled tattoo of sounds came from the main section of the town; and as all in the *adobe* rushed outside they saw the brightly lighted section of the village go black. All lights had been extinguished. Gabby rode away in a hurry.

"Who owns all them bee hives out back of this place?" asked Texas of his host.

"I, little *señor.* The bees make my living for me."

"I wants to buy some of them hives."

"You want my bees?" a spread of horror filled the man's face.

"Listen, hombre," said Texas, leading the man into a far corner of the yard. "Here's my scheme." And then, half in Spanish and the rest in a jargon of cowboy talk, Texas poured into the startled man's ears a plan for winning the fight both of them knew would rage fiercely when the sun got up on the mor-

row. At its conclusion the old Mexican gurgled a soft mellow laugh.

"Madre de Dios, my gentle, sweet bees!" he cried. "If I were not a friend of Pee Wee Slade I would not listen to such a folly. To lose one bee would be like losing a friend."

"But them bees will come back here. Not a one of them will leave the country, don't you know that? A bee sticks where he carries home his honey. It'll only be for a little while, and I know my pappy will pay you for any damage. Come on, we ain't got much time. And keep your mouth shut to that old turkey gobbler Gabby when he comes back. Put him in one room and me in another. I'm wise to that old jaybird. He figures to stay close by me, tonight, to keep me off the streets."

"But if you are hurt!"

"You gotta try in this life, my friend. It's a one-way street and you gotta keep going; for you can't come back. Hunches is my religion and I obeys them like a hound dog does a nigger kid. You can't tell what's in the future any more than you can tell why black berries is red when they is green. It's all settled, is it?"

"Si! What a boy! Come with me."

"Here are some pieces of cloth and some corks. you plug up them hive holes and then tell me which of them hives I can have."

Rat-a-tat-tat! Tat! Tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!

The ugly sounds of rifles came from the village as Texas and the Mexican moved between long rows of small square boxes painted white which were placed on four-post bases.

WHEN Gabby returned Texas was placidly playing dominoes with the old Mexican.

"Texas, Pee Wee and Gamaliel are sure cute." Gabby reported, "They're scattered out, are holdin' two streets, and have surrounded Blackie and his crew in all them dives down by The Coney Island Exchange. Pee Wee says that when the sun busts over the rim of the world at day break, Blackie will see his men is in a jam and won't do nothin' but try to hightail it or come to terms. The sheriff had quite a chore keepin' some of Blackie's men from busting into the jail and snaring Pete Jedrow. With the coming of Pee Wee the attack on the jail was give up."

"What did pappy say when you told him I and you had done come to town?"

"He was snortin' mad, for a minute; but when I guaranteed to keep you off the streets he said he was sorta glad I'd brought you along. Why, there's a concertina! You play your mouth organ, and I'll squeeze that music-makin' bellows. We might as well be musical as anything else."

"Now you're talkin'," laughed Texas. "What'll you be craving, Gabby?"

"I reckon there's no music like *The Midnight Express.* Let's have that, and when you come to the quick high notes, just hesitate, a little; my fingers ain't hell-for-prompt, like they once was." Gabby picked up the concertina, wheezed on it, settled back, said he was ready. The adobe wailed with the sad notes of the old railroad song. Between numbers Gabby would walk to the door and listen for sounds from the town.

After a while all firing ceased. Only scraps of laughter, bits of piano music, shouts, cries, curses, struggled out of Jimtown. Lights dimmed in houses. Jimtown had settled down to a night of trembling.

Gabby tired of music, and the crease across his lips hurt him. He decided on bed, and was shown a room apart from that where Texas was to sleep. The boy yawned; picked up his lizard, called his dog, said good night to Gabby and went to his room. Gabby's snores sounded strangely through the house immediately after Texas heard his boots hit the floor.

IT WAS one o'clock when Texas stepped out of his window and silently walking to the barn, where the ponies had been stabled, removed the ridiculous mother hubbard and the sun bonent from one of his saddle pockets. These he put on over his clothes, removed his boots, and walked barefooted into the area where the ghostly hives of the bees appeared in the faint light of the stars.

Into a small two-wheeled cart he placed a number of hives, and when the vehicle was loaded he shoved it ahead of him out of the Mexican's yard and down a dirt road in the direction of town. By his side trudged the trembling old bee man.

When a burro corral was reached Texas bid good night to the old peon who hurried back the way he had come. The boy, concealed behind a hay-rick, squatted back of the cart listening to a strange, low, weird humming. Inside the hives the bees buzzed in a fury of anger.

Jimtown stilled until not a human voice could be heard; but off there, where the main street ran, Texas knew that at least a hundred friends and foes were watching the narrow streets for the sign of something moving at which a bullet could be sent.

The minutes dragged, the hours went by. The east grew light, burros he-hawed; dogs barked and roosters crowed; then the sun came bouncing up and the sky filled with a sudden white fire. Resolutely, after smearing a concoction of stain given him by the old man on his face, Texas shoved out the cart and made for the alley which led back of the resorts where he knew Blackie and his crew were concealed. From his lips came a Spanish song, an old woman's song, which sounded a cracked falsetto in the morning air.

"It's a long, long road to old Madrid,
And hot and hard's the way.
But if love is sung,
When a girl is young,
The walking is but play."

Texas came abreast of a space between two houses. Here he saw the sheen of a rifle's muzzle. A voice cracked into his ear. The language was Spanish.

"Halt, where go you, old woman? Ah, it's Maria, eh?"

I go to the stage-stables. Can you not see the bees my brother is sending out to the nephew who lives in Corregio? Who are you to stop a busy woman? Loafer! Scum!" Texas pushed on, his cracked voice rang like an old tin pan being beaten with a stick.

"It's a long, long road to old Madrid,
An hot and hard's the way——"

"Who is it, Estaban?" queried a voice down the alley.

"Pedro Sanchez' sister who works in the lunch room. She is taking bees to the stage office."

"Don't the old fool know she might get hurt?"

"Go get drunk!" cackled Texas. "That is your business. Scum!"

This retort brought an explosion of mirth from hidden Mexicans who were within sound of the screechy voice. The cart rumbled on down the alley to the rear of the stage stable which was arranged around the Cony Island Exchange in a sort of L formation. Arriving at the back door of the stable Texas opened it, shoved through with the cart, slammed the sliding-door shut, locked it, quickly, and then seeing a thin, cadaverous looking bewhiskered stableman staring at him above a long-handled shovel, said in a low voice as he tossed back his sunbonnet, "Hello, Previous, I've got a cart load of crazy-mad bees here. Where can I put 'em for a little while? I'm Texas, you rannihan!"

"You chain-lightnin' young fool," snapped Previous, "does you want me to get took apart by that nest of sidewinders, next door?"

"Nope, I just want you to help me tote these hives to where I can manipulate 'em, fast. I'm goin' to make Blackie and his crew bee-have."

Previous, who had once worked for Pee Wee Slade, and was a half-brother to Gabby Gallagher, threw back his head, pulled at his frayed-out beard and chuckled.

"Laugh, dern you, Previous, laugh! And when you gets done, wrangle me some kind of close-meshed netting."

"I got plenty in the office, General, What you aim to do with that."

"I'm gonna fix our hats so's we won't breathe bees when I turns loose these honey-heavy, fightin' fools."

Previous hurried to the office as Texas brought out his boots and pulled them on. Gingerbread appeared from under the hives. And Heronimus out of a tin can.

Chapter X

SMOKE AND DUST

IT SEEMED, after the sun climbed high enough to get a first rate angle at Jimtown, that the very day settled down to a sinister business. Both sides had seen to it that their members had breakfast before the dawn. Now they were sparring for first advantage.

A gun cracked, a blue, overalled leg of a cowman flung out of sight with a

spasm of movement which contained elements of the ridiculous. Toots Malone laughed as he shouted to the injured man, one of the Bear Paw's top-hands.

"That burnt, didn't it, Kansas?"

"And that ain't all," answered Kansas. "I'll have to slab along from this on out. Hard luck, I say."

"Hard luck ain't no news, cowboy," cried one of Kansas' pals. "Where did that slug come from?"

"You can go to hell!" snapped Kansas.

"Listen, boys," some voice shouted. "I wonders who's been teachin' Kansas that kinda talk?"

A head showed, peering above a roof. And from the hunk of broken cement back of which Kansas lay there streaked a thin vicious vapor. A man's figure bounced into sight and hung over the edge of the adobe wall.

"That Mex was dog-silly," yelled Kansas. "He was a sorta futile fella, anyhow. I had my pants off and my shirt stuffed in a overall leg. I figured one of the nickel-plated dudes would make a try at style-snipin'. Now the dern sun's tryin' to raise me a crop of blisters. This dressing room's cramped, boys."

"Nothing more from you, Kansas, and very little of that," admonished Toots. "If you wasn't half skeleton and the other part scarecrow that lump of cement wouldn't save you from gettin' leaky."

From a dozen points in and around The Coney Island rifles cracked and the dirt about Kansas' covert was transformed into a spitting dust center.

"We'll get you, Kansas!" cried a challenge from the outlaws' stronghold. "You was mink-smart; but now we're hog-wild."

"So's your uncle's horse collar!" answered Kansas. "You ain't got your kingdom fenced, Blackie. We don't want you boys to leave here thinkin' you didn't bet enough. Show something that looks like a eye lash."

"Count them Mexicans what are on the roofs," commanded the sheriff.

"You don't count Mexicans, Mister Sheriff, you estimates them," shouted a cowboy. A snarl went up from the tops of buildings. Then Blackie's voice sounded; came roaring out of somewhere in zooming reverberation.

"Does you hombres know the rules of war?" he cried.

"Nobody's going to die of etiquette out here!" answered Toots.

"We've got a bunch of dance hall girls, some female chowmixers, and an old woman or two. Willya allow them to walk out and get away from this part of town?"

"Tell 'em to dust along. We'll not bust a cap for the next ten minutes. But tell 'em to toddle, when they starts. We don't want no inching along. We got to take this man's day all apart."

"Don't let me cramp your hand or chilblain your nerve, Toots," responded Blackie. "When the calico parade is over pull open your throttle, and let it all down hill to you."

FROM between two buildings crowded fifteen or twenty white-faced, trembling girls and women. They blinked at the garish light, when they reached the street, and vanished around a corner where some of the citizens met them and escorted them to houses of safety.

"You steepish sorta cow hands, why don't you saunter and strut so's we can get a crack at you?" yelled some one from Blackie's crowd.

"What's the size of your corns?" came an answer and both sides laughed. Then from the region where that reply had issued there rang a laughing voice. "There's four of us boys, over here! Count us! One, two, three, four! Come on, work them Winchesters."

"If I loved a liar, Missouri," answered Blackie, who had recognized the speaker, "I'd sure hug you to death. You're all alone, and right now you're all dead but the amen. We got you spotted. And if you wasn't so old you'd have sense enough to see you is sure precarious."

"I'm like cold potatoes, Blackie, I'll go better when I'm warmed up a little," slung back Missouri. "And ree-marking about my age don't forget that the young die good; but the old die clever. When you boys starts belching into the daylight I aims to bag me the world's record for skunk killing."

"I've heard a lotta thunder, in my time," Blackie replied.

Then——

From a point between two chimneys on the roof next door to The Coney

Island three guns boomed. Two men rolled into view from behind an overturned steel road-grader. A groan went up from Gamaliel Crow's men. The wounded were sheepherders; and both floundered around trying to reach a point of safety. Bullets flicked the earth about them; still they struggled on. A face appeared at a window and old Gamaliel sent a bullet crashing through the pane. The face vanished.

A sharp, shrill whistle sounded. Clearly the suggestion came that this was a signal.

"Now!" cracked Pee Wee Slade's voice.

The roar of many guns sounded, and in the vicinity of the large lock on the Coney Island's front door, there appeared a splintering center. Bullets were gnawing their way into that heavy cedar and crashing out the wrought-iron lock. A hole the size of a man's head appeared where the lock had been.

The door started to swing; but a sound back of it told of heavy objects quickly piled against it. Once more came that screeching whistle, and then another, "Now!" from Pee Wee. The top strap-hinge of the door curled up as a stream of heavy bullets tore into it. And in an amazing action, hinge, part of the frame, and a section of the heavy panelling, vanished inside the resort. Once more Pee Wee sent out his one-word command and the bottom hinge followed the first. The door began to fall. But into the still white day there jangled the jar of a bar slipping into heavy sockets. Obviously, the men behind that door had thrown bars across it. It ceased to move; held fast.

"No use wastin' ammunition, Pee Wee," Toots yelled, "They've dropped the bars."

"That's accordin' to Hoyle," answered Pee Wee. "They sure can't stumble out that way without first lettin' us know they're coming. Now cut out them windows, them boys need air, bad!".

IT TOOK just an even dozen well-placed bullets to send the panes and frames crashing into the saloon. Balls smacked the cross-sections of the frames and the windows crumpled in with a jingling sound. "Now angle 'em," sang out Pee Wee. "All you sharpshooters on the south smack the west wall through them windows. Glancing balls is hard to hold. Throw a curve at them babies; and you waddies out this way put some reverse English on your lead. We'll have the colic in that room, soon."

"Pee Wee! Pee Wee! Pee Wee!"

The sound of a screeching voice rang above the hurry of running boots. Gabby Gallagher rounded an alley, came into view, saw that he was in plain firing range, darted back, slashed around on one heel, clawed at the earth as he fell, sprawled on his hands and knees, and as four or five bullets clipped the earth under and about him he jerked and jumped into the air, arms flying, head bobbing.

"Oh, you Gabby!" shouted Toots. "You sure is a side-wheeling ace, ain't you?"

"Pee Wee! Pee Wee! Pee Wee!" shrieked Gabby. "Where's Pee Wee?"

"Here I am, you old fool! Run zig zag and get some hurry in them hocks. Who told you you was a cowboy?"

Gabby made the shelter of a building's rear. He steadied himself, listened, heard a low laugh and looked up to see Pee Wee smirking at him from a loft door. "What you carryin', the mail?" asked Pee Wee.

"Texas is gone," gasped Gabby. "He got out last night, while I was sleeping."

Pee Wee's face blanched, his cheeks went in, a strange look swept the kindly lines from his face. *"Where?"* was all he said.

Gabby climbed to the loft and settling himself beside Pee Wee told him what the bee man had confessed. Texas was somewhere in town with a cart full of bee hives, dressed in Maria's clothes. Pee Wee rushed to the front of the building and squinting through it searched the street and structures opposite. Then, as he surveyed The Coney Island, he saw the hayloft door of the stage stable, which adjoined The Coney Island, stir with almost an imperceptible movement. He nudged Gabby.

"That little son of a gun has made the stable. I seen the loftdoor make a motion. Now I wonders, if——"

A BULLET crashed past his face, another went whining above his head. Gabby fell prone, Pee Wee flattened and wormed fifteen feet from the building front. The amazing specta-

cle of that front wall's demolition seemed to rivet the eyes of both men. Splinters were flying dangerously. Bullets *pi-ing-ing* here, there, everywhere, sent an ugly echo throughout the loft.

"They musta heard me," said Gabby. Pee Wee withered him with a look.

"They figured you had joined-up with me. Where's them slugs coming from, you reckon, Gabby? Not from The Coney Island, that's a cinch. They got a slant to 'em."

A booming came from up the street.

"That's old Gamaliel's forty-ninety," announced Pee Wee. "He's spotted the nest that was harping on us. Listen to that!"

A perfect bedlam of firing sounded. The bullets ceased to pour into the loft. Toots yelled from the streets.

"Gamaliel's started them hombres out of the boarding houses. Look at them *mozos* come along them roofs!"

"One down, one cigar!" sang out Missouri. "I got that fella. Two down, two cigars! That'll learn 'em, how ——!"

The sentence was never completed. Missouri rolled out from his hiding-place, a great black blotch smudging the yellow sand beside him; he twitched once, and was still.

"I made a pretzel outa him," shouted one of Blackie's aids.

A man crawled into the loft. He was a herder. Pee Wee went to him. "Whatcha wantin', bo?" he asked.

"Gamaliel swears he just got a sight of young Texas. He saw a part of his face in a crack of the loft door to the stage stable. That door is higher than the roof of The Coney Island. Is Texas in that stable?"

Pee Wee nodded.

"I think so," he said; then he narrated what Gabby had told him.

"Gamaliel said if the boy was in the loft that he wanted to make a try to get every sniper off the roofs. It's a cinch Texas is goin' to show his face to them hombres. Where's the dynamite? Gamaliel's makin' slings and aims to toss fast-burnin' charges on them roofs."

"There's the powder and the caps in that sack," said Pee Wee. The herder grasped the sack and dropping from the second floor was running off when Pee Wee said, "When Gamaliel's ready, tell him to fire his wood-burner two times, fast. I'll have all the boys down here keep this end of the street busy."

The herder nodded that he understood.

"Boys," yelled Pee Wee, "you don't have to steal that ammunition you're shootin', remember that! I pays for them shells. Now save it till you hears me say, 'go'; then clean off them roofs, and be prepared to pot-shoot any hombre showing as much as a forelock, or wiggling a foot."

If the cowmen's rifles stilled so did those of the outlaws.

AND this silence was more dreadful than a sudden volley would have been. Minutes dragged; the sun climbed; a quick, stirring wind howled down the street, sending up the powdery dust in a perfect cloud. "Dern that dust!" yelled Toots. "I've got both eyes full."

Boom! Boom!

Gamaliel's forty-ninety barked like a hound dog.

"Go!" yelled Pee Wee.

Not a gun exploded among the ranks of the cow and sheepmen; but from up the street there cracked a sharp, snarling blast. *Dynamite!* Then another, and after this a third. Voices sounded from buildings across the way.

Blackie's exclamation snarled into the blinding dust.

"Where's that giant landing?" he yelled.

"Up on these roofs!" came an answer. "One wall's out and there are big holes on this adobe's top! We're caught like rats!"

"Get into the dance-hall and we'll open the doors into The Coney Island," yelled Blackie.

The wind surged fiercely, sending the blinding dust everywhere, and with it the pungent, acrid bite of the dynamite.

Crack! Zowie! Two more blasts shivered the glass in building fronts; the top coping of three buildings fell into the street. But the dust made a perfect screen through which the marksmen hiding in the attacked buildings made a hasty retreat over roofs, and from window to window, to the dance hall which lay next to the saloon. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the wind died, the air cleared, up-shooting spirals of whirling dust went drifting away like

kites. Pee Wee, staring through the bullet-riddled front of his covert, saw a sight which made his heart feel like a weight in his breast.

On the roof of The Coney Island appeared Slim Texas, his sunbonnet dropped back on his neck, his red hair tousled, the smear of dark color on his face showing repulsively against the white of his neck and the creamy skin which lay exposed at his open throat. The boy was examining a covered window of the roof which opened immediately over the center of the saloon below. Gabby raised a hand to his sore lips, touched Pee Wee, saw that the old man's eyes were fixed on the boy, then peered through a hole and watched Texas.

As an answer to the fury of the dynamite a smudge of smoke rolled down the street. It was alive with the bitter fumes of burning mesquite. It filled the space between buildings, solidly; surged rolled, piled everywhere.

A steam whistle blew from the alfalfa mill.

"That's dinner-time!" Kansas cried, mockingly. "Close down, Blackie, and let's go to our frijoles!"

"It may be dinner-time, for some, but it's only twelve o'clock for Blackie," replied a taunting cowboy. "Look out!"

THE bars to the front door of the Coney Island grated through the gray, smudgy air. "They're goin' to make a try for the street," cried Pee Wee. And as if to reply to this a dozen guns cracked and the bars were heard to fall back into place.

"In this smoke," commented Toots, "them babies is liable to promenade for the horses. Their broncs are tied in the wing-corral back of the stage-stable. Pour some lead into them broom tails. Dern that smoke!"

Then—from the roof, came a staccato voice.

"Don't none of you rannihans get to shootin' them broncs!" It was Slim Texas talking. "Let me see one of you waddies feed a poor, little, pony any lead. Keep your eyes peeled. This whole block's on fire, and now they're getting a hose rigged up on that water tank. Get ready, they'll be on the roofs, right now!"

Then came another voice.

"Are you ready?" it cracked through the smelly vapor.

"Let 'em come!" this from Slim Texas.

"Who was that?" asked Pee Wee.

"That left-handed brother of mine, Previous. I wonder where he's at?" answered Gabby.

Creak! Crack! Creak! Creak! Creak!

"I've yanked up too much baled-hay not to know that noise," blurted Gabby. "That Previous is workin' the block and tackle what reaches out of that stable's loft alongside of The Coney Island. I wonder what fool stunt Texas is pullin'."

"All alone on that roof," wailed Pee Wee. *"Poor little fella!"*

The sound of gushing water swished through the stilly heat of the air. A man crawled into the loft, after a while, and came to Pee Wee. It was the herder who had taken away the dynamite a short time before.

"They're pourin' water on the houses that we set afire with the giant," he said. "Gamaliel says for you boys to shoot out the hose-connection, or bust off the in-take pipe. We can't get a good crack at the supply tank from where we are. In a little while, if that fire lasts, we'll be able to attack The Coney Island from the rear. It's a cinch that fire will play out when it smacks the three-foot walls of that joint."

"Man, it's so dern smoky you can't see no water tank. And, say, you tell Gamaliel and the rest of you hands not to shoot at anything they sees on top The Coney Island. Young Texas is up there. He musta swung over to the roof on the hay-hoist. What he's doin' has got me plumb loco. Don't shoot in his direction, a-tall, you hear me?"

"All right, but put that watertank outa business, as soon as you can." The herder dropped into the alley.

"Center on the water tank, boys!" yelled Pee Wee. "And be dead certain where you shoot. In this smoke mistakes is liable to be as frequent as they are fast. If any of you knows how to sight on that water tank by feel or by compass, tear into it. Stop that water!"

Creak! Crack! Creak! Creak! Creak!

THE burring twang of straining rope and jangling revolution of jingling pulley wheels set Pee Wee's teeth on edge.

"If it wasn't for the smoke, he wouldn't have a chance," he said, making the terror of his mind audible.

"Why, Pee Wee," Gabby blurted. "He's all right! Don't you understand? They ain't no windows to The Coney Island, facing the stage-stable."

A load lifted from Pee Wee. "All we can do is to wait," he said, morosely. "But if I ever gets my hands on him I'll do something I ain't never yet done. I'll whang-leather the seat of his pants."

Then came the return of the wind. It arrived with a rush, hit the earth in a down-blast, ascended in a whirl-pool and took with it, as though it were a huge funnel, the drifting, cloud of smoke. Opposite buildings became visible. Guns cracked all around, the water-tank spurted water in twenty places, its four-inch castiron intake pipe which ran from a flume across from The Coney Island, and to its rear, splintered, gave way, and a great cascade of crystal-clear water described a beautiful arch as it fell to the earth, the sunlight fashioning a small rainbow just above it.

Blackie's voice was heard. "That's plenty, boys!" he screeched. "Let us make our ponies and we'll leave this dern town for you fellows to do with what you want."

"The Jews got into Jericho by tryin', Blackie," answeerd Toots Malone, "but you centipedes we aims to fry in a courtroom."

"You means you won't let us quit?"

"Sure, we'll let you quit! But you gotta pour out of that dive like buttermilk out of a boot and come a-fannin' with your hands grabbin' at the sky, and never a rod hangin' onto you."

"Look!" whispered Gabby. "There comes that step-brother of mine, Previous. I never knew that old, stoveup, longhorn was that agile! There he goes! Hotziggity dog!"

Pee Wee beheld Previous, a rope in his hand, dart back from the open door of the stable's hayloft, then come rushing out. He jumped into the air, swinging on the rope, and as his body reached the end of the rope's length, and was directly over the saloon's roof, Previous dropped and landed beside Texas who steadied the old man and kept him from falling.

Then Pee Wee and Gabby fell into a silent pop-eyed staring.

Previous drew from his clothes a bundle of mosquito netting. Some of this he tied around Texas' wide-brimmed hat and drew it together about the boy's shoulders. Next he tied the mother hubbard the boy was wearing securely about each boot above the ankle. Texas fixed the netting around the hat of Previous, and buttoned up the old man's leather riding vest; then the boy motioned Previous to retire to a far corner of the roof.

Pee Wee yelled, a note of mirthful delight zooming into his voice. "I gets it, now!" he joyed. "Ain't he the cunnin'est kid you ever see? This is goin' to be *good!*"

Texas, wielding a short piece of two-by-four stuff, pried off the covered-window of the roof exposing a four-foot opening. Next he lifted a white rectangular object, steadied it on the edge of the window, dropped a hand to its bottom, worked out what appeared like a plug, then tilted the object, released it and allowed it to fall into the room below.

"Bees!" yelled Pee Wee. "Bees! He's feedin' 'em bees!" Then he shouted to his men in the streets, "Boys, watch that front door. Pants and plenty heads, is comin' out that right soon." Texas dropped another box, and another. Pee Wee gave way to laughter as he saw the boy at work.

Chapter XI

THE BEES HAVE IT!

EVENTS were happening with startling rapidity. What had been a tragic scene an instant before now had become an amazing and ludicrous sequence of phenomena.

Out of what had been the main window of The Coney Island catapulted a human form. It sailed through the air, lit in a huddle, and just when Toots Malone was about to pull a trigger he saw that that form was a Mexican. The man rolled over and over on the earth, pawing at his neck, clawing at his face, and his piercing *"Por Dios!"* had in it a pathetic fright which convulsed the riflemen about the scene.

"Up with them hands, *mozo!*" yelled Toots.

"Señor, eef I quit move de hands den come de pains of Satan!"

"Angle over on this side of the street." The Mexican lost no time in

that. "There's a water-tank. Jump in that!" Toots cringed as the man went by him; but an instant later let out a yelp. "Dern, right in the nape of my neck! Ow! A bee!"

Then came another form, head first, sailing out of the front window. Like the first this outlaw was gunless, hatless, a Mexican. He landed on his face and clawed dust about his head like a fighting bull. Somebody herded him into a corner where the man waved hands and ducked in an amazing way.

From The Coney Island bellowed a motley chorus. Curses sounded and cries of pain. Faces showed; guns flew into the street; the front doors were thrown wide and out rushed a mob. And above it, darting here and there, settling suddenly about the bobbing heads were thousands of tiny black spots.

"We surrender, *señores,*" yelled a tall Mexican.

"What about it, boys?" cried Pee Wee. "Shall we let 'em file outa that place? All them in favor signify by the usual sign.

"Ay! Ay! Ay!" rang a laughing series of voices.

"Let 'em have it?" shouted Toots. "Ain't they got it?"

"The bees have it, the motion's carried. Everybody across the street come out that door, minus all guns, and everything but speed. Come on out, Blackie! We wants you, first!"

A cry of rage rang from the recesses of The Coney Island.

But through the door jammed a stampeding group of men.

The raised sidewalk clattered with rifles, carbines, and all manner of revolvers. And over this hardware pelted the high-heeled boots of Mexicans and Blackie's American pals. The street filled, and the mob milled. And each man in the stomping throng was fighting his face, slapping his shirt, at variout spots, and cavorting in antics too ridiculous to describe. The mob started for the series of coverts where Pee Wee's boys lay hidden.

"Don't you rannihans come this way!" cried Kansas. "I'll feed you somethin' hotter'n bees if you do. Keep them dern honey hounds to your ownselves! "What's that?"

A long-drawn wail sounded from immediately back of the main entrance of the saloon. "Can I come out, boys?"

It was the voice of Harley McAfee, Blackie's chief aide.

"I'm dern near dead!" he moaned.

"Come on, and come quick," ordered Pee Wee Slade.

"Here I am! Which way is you-all? I can't even see the sun. Help me off this platform, some of you boys."

"Fall off, that's how I got where I am," answered one of the American bandits. "A bump on your head will sure feel like a pain-killer compared to what's near-and-next on the program. Have a heart, Pee Wee! Let us amble, will ya?"

"Here I come! Shoot me as soon as you see me!" It was Blackie's voice, and it rang high above the mirth of the Bear Paw boys, and the pain shrieks of the outlaws stamping in the dust. Just one instant as he passed through the door did Blackie hesitate, then he leaped in furious haste and collided with and upsetting Harley McAfee plowed into the dirt of the street. He arose, swiping at his face, his hat fell from his head, and in a pitiful manner he turned his face toward the Pee Wee men. That countenance! It was a writhing, evil, ugly, mass of moving insects, buzzing, flying off, coming back settling, stinging, dropping, and yet the hideous swarm seemed to conceal the features of Blackie as though he wore some atrocious mask.

"Put the handcuffs on me, willya? But take these bees off my face. I'm stung till I'm blind."

TOOTS hopped up, jerking a pair of manacles from a chaps pocket. He advanced toward Blackie. And exactly as he was in the act of snapping the cuffs to the bandit leader's wrists, his gun, somehow, exploded. That noise had an amazing effect. The bees about Blackie's face seemd to rise in the air with a single motion and all of them made a direct line for the spot from which had arisen that shocking report. A captain bee stung Toots on the nose.

Then, as he turned to flee, and his shirt tail escaped from his waistband and fluttered in the wind, a number of the bees hit him in the small of the back causing him to crow-hop in the air as though he had stepped on a hot horseshoe.

More bees nipped his neck, stung him through his sweaty shirt and sent him

down the street, spanking himself every step, yelling like a frightened child, and convulsing everybody in hysterical mirth. Toots was headed for the creek and into it he leaped.

"Hi, pappy!" Texas' voice shouted from the roof of The Coney Island. "There's nothin' but honey comb left in this say-loon. Tell one of the boys to fling me up a lass-rope! Previous and I wants to come down."

Somebody tossed up the honda end of a riata. This Texas looped over a chimney-top and sliding down it hurried across the street as Previous slipped over the roof and descended to the ground where he stared after Toots Malone splashing in the creek.

Down the road, where ran the stage line, there appeared a bunch of horsemen ahead of a string of light wagons and these being guided into town by the six-horse stage.

"Here comes the sheriff of San Clemente County, boys!" yelled the sheriff of Jimtown.

"As usual, *late!*" snapped Kansas. "I reckon, cowhands, we'll let that posse mop up these bees and these brigands, while all us cow chambermaids gets us standin' room alongside of somethin' that tastes familiar, and fiery. All them as wants to paint landscapes in their brains follow me."

As the posse dashed up and the two sheriffs met, Pee Wee's men ran into those of Gamaliel Crow in the alley. Quick glances were shot, then eyes turned away, from a spot under a loft-door where Pee Wee stood with both arms around a lank, skinny form attired in a greasy, discolored mother hubbard. Gamaliel Crow approached and laid a hand on the arm of Texas.

"My boy," he said, then gulped. "The Lord is never-failing."

"Gee, I'm glad to see you, Mister, I'm sure happy, *now!*"

"Judge Terry's over there, sonny," announced Pee Wee. "Let's I and you and Gamaliel cross around to the hotel. He's got a mighty lot to say to you, boy."

FROM somewhere came the subdued yelping of a dog.

"Gingerbread," smiled Texas. "He's shut up in the barn." And away he went to return with the dog leaping at his side. In the street the sheriffs were collecting their prisoners. Blackie and some ten aids were walked to the jail, each by way of a visit to a doctor's office, for these men were in a sorry way, nearly all were blind. Blackie's condition was almost repulsive, so sadly swollen was his face, neck, hands. His eyes were like slits in a popping roll of inflammation.

When at last Texas settled himself in a room of the hotel, Judge Terry, Pee Wee and Gamaliel before him, he particularly saw strange exchanges of meaningful glances from one pair of old eyes to the other; then it was that some fear arose in him. Judge Terry began.

"This came in with the stage, just a moment ago, Texas, read it my boy," he handed Texas a telegram. The boy read.

I AM LEAVING IMMEDIATELY STOP IN ANSWER TO YOUR WIRE ARRIVE JIMTOWN TWO DAYS STOP HAVE MY BOY MEET ME STOP CUSTER CLAIBORNE CONNAUGHT

"What's this got to do with me?" asked Texas.

"Your name, my boy, is Custer Claiborne Connaught," smiled Judge Terry. "I should like to know what you think about that."

"My name is *what?*"

"Custer Claiborne Connaught."

"Me, and my freckles, my dog and my Heronimus? Say, we don't grade up with no such name as that. My name's Gerry Jedrow, I'm a *baa-baa* sheepman, always was, always will be, and right now I'm r'aring to find out what's goin' to be done with Blackie, the man who killed my blood-and-bone pappy."

"Listen, sonny," Judge Terry said, "Custer Claiborne Connaught, a big cow baron of Montana, is your father. Here is a picture of you taken at Butte when you were two years and three months old."

HE GAVE the boy a small photo of a child in white wearing a wide, stiff collar, a ribbon of gigantic size fixed in a huge bow to his hair which was knotted above an ear. Texas flopped the picture to a table in disgust.

"Pappy, show him how I looked when I was two-and-a-half," he said to Pee Wee. "Fetch out that picture I give

to you, showing me and Hi Jedrow."

A ghost of a smile flicked across Pee Wee's mouth.

"That's what fixed it, Texas," said Pee Wee. "You see, in both pictures your face is the same. In that Salt Lake City photo you look a little tough, and in that Butte thing you're the band-box kid, but a leopard can't change his spots and neither can you change your scowl nor them freckles. You're one and the same. But it wasn't that, boy! Listen to the Judge now. He's got the goods."

"Some time ago," intoned the judge, "I received a circular letter describing a boy who had been kidnapped from Montana over thirteen years ago. There was this baby picture attached to that notice, and there was also this." The Judge drew out of a pocket a printed circular, from which he read, "and on the breast of that child appeared my brand, the Twin Hearts. That brand was burned in my boy's flesh when he was two. He stumbled against a pony-iron during branding time and the brand was seared in his breast."

Texas' eyes went wide, then he grinned.

"And I ain't a sheep-man?" he asked.

"No, you're cow, top-side, middle-ways, all the way to the bottom. Pete Jedrow confessed to me and the sheriff last night," interrupted Pee Wee, "that Hiram Jedrow stole you to get even with your father for sending him to jail for six months for stealing a saddle. He brought you south on a sheep-feeding trip and that was the time I got you. Right this minute there's a reward of twenty thousand dollars for your return. Your father is richer than the mint. Knowing that they could jerk this reward outa your old man, Hiram Jedrow, Blackie, Pete and Harley McAfee aimed to take you north and get the money, after they had rustled a big bunch of beef steers off of Blackie's bosses."

THE sheriff of Jimtown ran into the room.

"Boys," he yelled, "you-all will have to get down on the street and herd your men out of town. This is the first time I ever seen sheep and cowmen drinking, elbow to elbow, and I tells you it's the last time I wants to see it. Them boys is working up a mad which means but one thing. They're goin' to take Blackie, Pete and Harley McAfee out and stretch lass-ropes with 'em. I don't want this, I craves having a jury and Judge Terry try these men."

"Maybe it's a good thing," suggested Pee Wee. "It's quicker over, cheap, and right clean to do that messy job frontier style."

"No it ain't. There's the reward for this boy Texas. I aims to figure in on that, me and my deputies, and I wants Blackie's confession heard in a court-room, so's I can get a slice of that twenty thousand. Blackie tells the same tale as Pete and Harley McAfee, and Blackie also says that he killed Hi Jedrow because Hi wasn't goin' through with his end of the game to stampede the sheep and carry the war to the cowmen. He told Blackie that, and Blackie croaked him.

"I've got all I want written down and signed to by Harley, Pete and Blackie. Where I made my mistake was lettin' that old under sheriff of mine out of my sight. He romps down to the saloons where the boys is lickering up and spills what them confessions said. Listen! Can't you hear the howls of them wolves? Get goin', all of you, and take them lobos out of Jimtown. I don't want this two-candle power burg pulled up by the roots!"

"Texas, you go, sonny," said Pee Wee, "and ask Gabby, Previous, Toots, Kansas, and the rest of the boys to let this law-thing ramble. Tell 'em you craves just that, and nothing more. I reckon them pot hounds will listen to you."

Texas started for the door.

"Take off that mother hubbard," laughed Pee Wee, "you reminds me of that picture of you with the starched collar and the mile-high ribbon in your hair."

"Well, ain't my name Custer Claiborne Connaught?"

"Yes, what about it?"

"With that name, man! I sure oughta go around in a mother hubbard or a wrapper, all the time. Don't tell the boys about that Custer Claiborne thing, will you, pappy?"

"Nope, I won't. I hates that as much as you do."

"They might not be much music to a name like Texas, but it fits me like a pick handle does a pick, and is as handy around a cowcountry as a pocket

to a shirt. You gentlemen does your heavy talkin' while I'm gone," smiled Texas, sadly, "for when I returns I don't want no more *habla* like I been listening to since I sat down in this room. I'm all dizzy trying to recollect which is, and which is not, my pappy, where is and where is not my home, whether I'm sheep, cow, wart-hog, or nit-wit sort of man."

WITH this Texas went out, and they heard his boots clicking down the stairs, heard the front door slam, caught the echo of his passage up the street, and then his high hail as he glimpsed Toots Malone and Gabby and called them to him. Soon a roar in the street told of a forming mob in front of the hotel. Pee Wee stared from the window.

"Sssh," he said, "Texas is makin' his talk, and oh, man! he's Patrick Henry-in' them cowhands silly. If you could see how he's stilled 'em! Why, if that kid continues to learn speakin', like that, by the time he's twenty-one he can wear a stove-pipe hat, long-tailed coat, string-tie and rolled-down collar and travel over the country with his own medicine show."

"Wait till he's done," said the sheriff. "If that bunch of sheep and cowhands walks away quiet-like, look out! But if the gang blurts out in a big bellow the kid has won. I'm afraid to look; you tells us what's coming off, Pee Wee."

They heard the carrying squeak of Texas' voice saying, "And more'n just justice, they's this about it. My real pappy has got twenty thousand dollars posted for my recovery. You'd think I was a lost, graded, yearling bull, from the way they been advertisin' me; but my old man's got to pay out that jack, and somebody's goin' to earn it. It'll take a courtroom to establish who, and I wants to be there to have some say in the matter. I'll see that every hand who took part in this roundup of these crooks gets a slice of that reward money, so big, that it'll help him feed the butterflies, and keep the merry-go-round wheels goin' for four days. Will you-all play this game like I wants it dealt?"

A bellow did come out of that throng.

"All right, get yourselves a flock of bottles. Pee Wee says the expense is to be piled onto him, then climb into saddles and all of us is goin' to head back to the Bear Paw where we'll barbecue some lambs, calves, steers and chickens. My dad is comin' down from the blizzard factory, which they calls Montana, in two days, and we've got to be on our Sunday behavior when that dally-bred cowhand gets here. Does you-all go gentle outa this town, or does you just gum up this game like a lot of skin-sheddin' diamond-backs gone blind-mad with a killin' fury?"

"We follows you, Custer Claiborne Connaught," cried the half-drunk under-sheriff. And then there came a roar.

"He's won," gloated Pee Wee. "Go down, Mister Sheriff, and take that under-sheriff of yours off the street before my boy Texas folds his six-gun over his brow and etches him some brains by way of a flock of headaches."

The sheriff rushed from the room.

TO THIS day you'll find old men in and around Jimtown who will tell you of the strange meeting between Custer Claiborne Connaught and his boy. The elder Connaught was as straight as an arrow, grisled, thin cheeked, with an orange-flecked gray eye, and freckled even at his advancde age.

After the introductions were over, and hand clasps were finished, Pee Wee, Gamaliel, and the father and son stepped into stirrups and rode to the Bear Paw. On the way Texas leaned toward Pee Wee and said, "I knows now where I belongs, where I come from. Soon's I got one slant at his eyes and his freckles, and the red layin' low under that iron gray hair, I just knowed I was a sample-copy of that old salty cowhand. Pee Wee, you know one thing?"

"What is it, sonny?"

"Custer Claiborne Connaught ain't such a terrible bad name, after all. And between us two I'm sure satisfied my father will do to take along. I'm goin' to have a understandin' with him, right off. He's all alone in the world, is get-in' so he can't ride the crimp ones, like he used to, and tailin'-up frozen calves durin' Montana winters ain't settin' him wild no more. He's got plenty money, and I'm his specialty, so he says. Work-in' on that string it'll be like takin' candy from a baby to get him to do what I wants done."

"What?"

"Buy out that spread from them dudes Blackie Hook worked for, throw the Bear Paw into that, run half-breeds and white faces east of a big drift-fence, and turn over all that desert country and the cool foot hills to Gamaliel Crow and his outfit for a sheep country. Sheep and cows down here, and you watch Jimtown bounce!"

And that's exactly what did happen.

After the meeting with the herders and the cowboys the father of Texas gave a big feed prepared by the Chinaman cook whom he had brought in on the stage from San Clemente. And when that feast and the speeches were over Pee Wee, Gamaliel, Gabby, Toots, Kansas, the two Connaughts, Gingerbread and Heronimus assembled in the big living-room of Pee Wee's house.

"Colonel Connaught," said Pee Wee, "I and Texas we used to pass many a night practicing our singin'. Would you like to listen to *The Midnight Express?*"

"I sure would. Is that the one about the dying engineer?"

"Have you heard that?" exclaimed Texas.

"Son, it was your mother's favorite song. She carried the air to it, while I sung the alto."

"I loved that, also," broke in Gamaliel. "If you boys will allow me I'll try the bass."

TEXAS picked up his harmonica and sounded the G-note. Pee Wee broke into the air, Gabby screeched a phantom tenor, Custer Claiborne Connaught harmonized with a disjointed alto and Gamaliel boomed out a magnificent bass. Twice they sang all thirteen verses—much to the disgust of Gingerbread, who at last curled up near the wood box with Heronimus sleeping by his side.

And before that night was done Custer Claiborne Connaught senior had decided to dispose of his northern holdings, buy the spread Blackie had worked for, and back Gamaliel Crow in a big bunch of sheep to be run over the desert and in the front range of the mountains. A forty-mile long six-strand wire fence would be constructed as a drift-fence to separate the sheep and cow ranges.

That night Texas slept with Pee Wee, giving up his bed to Custer Connaught. And immediately after Pee Wee had blown out the lamp and hopped into bed he heard Texas chuckling.

"What is it, sonny?" the old man asked.

"Didn't I work her slick?" asked the boy.

"Meaning just which?"

"Well, everybody's satisfied, ain't they? You didn't s'pose I was going to let no blood-and-bone daddy come between I and you, didja?"

"Don't, sonny, don't!"

"There you go! I'm daggoned if I just knows how to take you, sometimes. You're part ways like old Jim. If I just don't ride you straight-up, slick and high, and saddle-rig you the same all the time, you're sure to get salty and throw me for a loop just when I'm thinkin' you're as mild-mannered as a sheep."

"Sheep? Didja allude to me as a sheep?"

"Ugh," said Texas. "Close that window, pappy! There's a wind kicking up and driftin' across from Dead Man's Ridge."

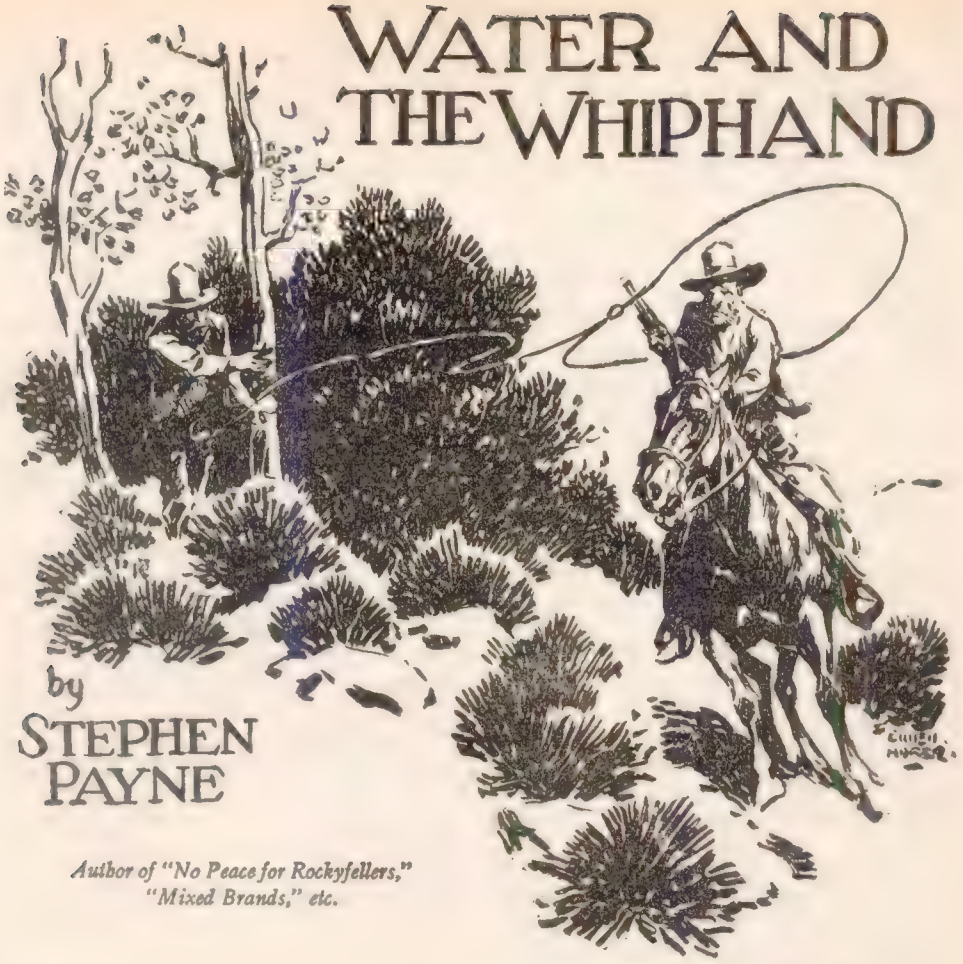
"I was only jokin', Texas. I don't hate sheep. Gamaliel Crow showed me what runnin' woollies can make of a man. Sometime I got to read you out of the Bible what the Good Book thinks of herders. They called them shepherds in them days."

"Did the Big Book mean dogs?"

"No, son. Men. Fine men; sweet-singin' men; men like David who slew Goliath. Them was the men what was flockmasters in them days long afore the Indians had horses in America. They's big things in that Old Book."

From the bunkhouses there sounded a low hum of voices, and then the twanging mellowness of a jew's-harp. These notes were like a peace to Pee Wee and Texas. They turned over, and dropped into instant slumber.

WATER AND THE WHIPHAND



by
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They trade land and water in Demijohn Basin, and sometimes lead!

AMONGST the six cowmen what is of any particular importance in Demijohn Basin is a "gentlemen's agreement" that not one of 'em is to file on the land 'round Demijohn Spring or fence in that priceless water hole. This spring flows a sizeable stream, and is to be kept open for the use of all range stock regardless of who owns said stock.

Demijohn Spring's in the center of humdingin' fine range country, rolly-hills all 'round it, but it is the only water for miles and miles in any direction. The grass close 'round is always chawed plum' into the ground, and deep, worn trails lead to the water hole from north, east, south and west. Afternoons you can see a thousand cattle bunched there. The long end of them cattle bears the brands of the six different cowmen I mentioned fust off. Filled up on water, they're restin', gruntin', chewin' their cuds, afore they go meanderin' back into the hills.

There's peace on the Demijohn Basin range, with everything rosy as a summer evenin' at sun-down, until ol' "Scrabble" Perkins sells his herd. Then what does this ornery old codger do but forget all 'bout that "gentlemen's agreement" and slap a homestead filin' onto the hundred and sixty acres surroundin' Demijohn Spring! More'n that, he makes desert land entry on three hundred and twenty acres of dry, sagebrush land adjoinin' his homestead. Afore Scrabble's neighbors knows what's up he has brought in a crew of tough hombres as workmen and has throwed 'round his homestead and desert a five-wire fence, with posts every rod, an' built a ditch from the spring out to the dry land, what soaks up water

like a sponge, and there ain't enough moisture tricklin' down the channel where the water did flow, for to give a gopher a drink.

'Course Scrabble's neighbors remonstrate with him, especially old Demijohn Kelly, who discovered the basin as bears his name. (I punch cows for Demijohn, which is how I come to know all about this business.) But remonstratin' don't do no good. Perkins is like a cowman what has suddenly become a sheepman—lost all his manhood and just become a hog. He hadn't been liked none too well earlier. But now!

Glarin' at me and the men what was his friends and chewin' his tobacco savage he announces he's within his rights 'cordin' to law. He's seen a good proposition in gettin' possession of this water by takin' up the land, and he aims to hold on to it.

"Go talk to the sheriff at Keystone and see how far you hombres'll get," he challenges.

Demijohn and the other four cowmen knows how far they'll get. 'Cordin' to law there ain't a doubt but what Scrabble Perkins is within his rights.

Quick as that fence is up, so the cattle can't bust through it, they jus' stand around, bellerin' for water. They'd stand and beller, hoarser and hoarser, drier and drier, 'till they died, I reckon, if Demijohn and his neighbors hadn't took the ganted critters to their little fenced ranches back in the foothills. There they can get water but not enough grass to last 'em long. 'Count of that grass proposition and the fencin' of Demijohn Spring, looks like these five cowmen is goin' to be forced outa business.

SCRABBLE PERKINS sets tight. Funny how dirt mean and ornery some hombres can get. There ain't no arguin' with him. He wants that aqua-pura to irrigate his desert claim. He won't pull down his fence, nor will he consider sellin' water to these needy cowmen. They can jus' go hang, or go to the wall, for all Scrabble cares.

'Course nobody in Keystone'll butt into the affair. Sheriff Ora Ross sez it ain't none of his business, but it may be if the cowmen start anything. Regardless of that warnin' Demijohn Kelly calls a secret meetin' of his four rancher friends, Jack March, Shorty Larsen, Bullwhip Maxwell and Rome Ives. I'm the only cowpuncher present, probably 'cause I'm so close to Demijohn, him treatin' me like I was his partner 'stead of just a hired hand.

Now, as often happens in thinly settled range territory, one of these ranchers, Rome Ives, is a Notary Public, and Bullwhip is a Justice of the Peace. But the Notary is the 'portant thing. He can witness documents like deeds, and make 'em all legal. Rome has a warranty deed and a few other papers along, as well as his Notary's seal, when that same night we all ride to call on Scrabble Perkins. Demijohn Kelly has ten thousand dollars in cash with him. He'd had it sent to him by a Denver commission firm what was financin' him or his cattle and of course he hadn't told nobody in Keystone of his raisin' this jack.

A grim-eyed bunch the six of us are, as we jog along to Scrabble's ranch back in the foothills, the one he owned afore he filed on Demijohn Spring. He has a couple of hard-boilt pills camped at the spring to see as nobody bothers his fences and ditch.

There's a light in Scrabble's shack as we ride up to it. I've took off my spurs, and now I swing off and scout 'round to make sure nobody but the ornery ol' bachelor is to home. In his sock feet, he's readin'.

Thump! Scrabble's feet hits the floor an' he swings about as six men, with both rifles and six-shooters, walk in on him. We surround him and Demijohn states our business.

"Scrabble, yuh're sellin' the land yuh own—this ranch—to me t'night. Ten thousand's a liberal price for it. We've got the deed all filled out except for your signature. Yuh're to sign it, take the cash and drift. Your homestead and desert claim is to go back to the Government. Yuh savvy, yuh're just to abandon both claims. We're going to pull the fences down."

SCRABBLE glares at us. "Railroadin' me outa the country, are yuh?" he snarls. "What if I won't go?"

"I ain't sayin'," Demijohn returns. "But what we'll do'll be a-plenty. You'll go."

"Tain't the words, but the way Demijohn says 'em that makes Scrabble turn gray. "Have it your way," he growls.

and mentions a few choice names.

Demijohn shuts him up, produces the cash and lays it on the table. Rome Ives hauls out the deed and a fountain pen. We all crowd up close to the table to watch Scrabble Perkins write his John Henry, and there ain't a one of us on guard. Perkins is just blottin' his signature when, with the suddenness of a thunder clap, two orders are barked at the bunch of us.

One order sounds from the window, the other from the door across, but both are the same and four six-shooters are coverin' the five ranchers and me.

Entirely unexpected by us, Scrabble's two toughs, what was camped at the Spring, has arrived at this ranch. I figger unless I want to die with my boots on I'd better obey orders. The ranchers figger same as me. There's six pair of hands poked toward the low ceilin'. We're a flabbergasted lookin' layout, I tell yuh.

"Good work, boys!" bellers Scrabble. "Keep 'em covered while I get their hardware. Heck of a lot of it."

Rifles, six-shooters, belts, jack knives and other articles! Scrabble collects everything we've got. Then, one at a time, he ties us solid, while his two henchmen, "Slug" Baldwin and Emmet Cooper, keep their cannons trained on us. Scrabble asks these two toughs how they happened to show up so opportune like. Slug answers, they was outa coffee and rid in to get some. When they arrived they seen all our hosses, done some 'vestigating, and acted as they thunk their boss'd like 'em to act.

Scrabble says they done prezactly right. "Know what these coyotes was doin' to me?" he inquires. "Handin' me, an honest citizen, the same sort of dose they'd hand a stock thief what they didn't have quite enough evidence to hang. Givin' me a price for my land and orderin' me to shove the wind! That's what they was doin'."

He glares at all of us, and at grizzled old Demijohn in particular. "I got the whip hand now," he gloats. "Beg for your life, damn yuh!"

DEMIJOHN just glares back without a word. Slug Baldwin, a busted-nosed brute with the eyes of a reptile, wants to know if Scrabble wants us kilt. Considerin' this, Scrabble picks up the roll of greenbacks on the table and his eyes glitter as he counts it. I can see he likes the stuff. Presently he looks at the deed, makes as though he was goin' to tear it up, then changes his mind. I can almost see his mind work. Some kind of scheme is beginnin' to take form in his noodle. He gets it corralled.

"Nope, Slug, we won't kill these jaspers—yet," says Scrabble. "You cusses wanted to buy my deeded land and make me get out? All right. I'll sell, and get out. Yep. But yuh'll sure pay me for doin' it."

A triumphant grin and he proceeds. "Demijohn brung ten thousand dollars with him. I reckon, in fact I know each one of you hombres, except Fitz Baer," indicatin' me, "can dig up just as much jack. Uh-huh. How to get ten thousand outa each one of yuh's the problem."

He figgers on that for a couple of minutes; then slaps his leg.

"I got it! 'Course you never told Sheriff Ross what yuh was plannin', and 'course nobody in Keystone knows. So Rome Ives will ride to town with me, all peaceful like, draw all his jack outa the bank, an' mortgage his land an' stock to raise the rest of ten thousand smackers."

An odd expression comes into Rome's eyes, which says plain as words, "Just let me get into town alone with you, and——"

"I see what yuh're thinkin'," Scrabble chuckles. "Wal, yuh're to ride to Keystone with me, quiet as a mouse, and yuh won't say a damn word to nobody 'bout what's goin' on. Also yuh'll come right back here with me. Why won't yuh say nothin' to nobody and why'll yuh go with me quiet and peaceful? 'Cause," the ornery walloper pauses to give weight to his next words, " 'Cause, if I don't show up here right at the hour and minute when I say, with Rome ridin' right along with me, my two gunslingers here will kill all these other ranchers. D'yuh get it?"

We all get the diabolical scheme all right enough. Rome's face goes alkali white. Jack March and Shorty Larsen gasp. Bullwhip strains frantic at his tied hands. But it ain't no use. Scrabble's two helpers lick their chops—so to speak. They act like nothin' would please 'em bettern' salivatin' us all.

Scrabble hisself is tickled pink over how smart and crafty he is. "I reckon

I can figger out how to get ten thousand from each of you hombres," he sez. "F'r instance, there's two banks in Keystone. Also a gent what sometimes loans money. There's three wires tuh pull. Rome does business at one bank, Jack March at another, while Bullwhip gets his backin' from Harvey Holderness. So when me and Rome reach town we'll let on like it's a secret he's gettin' dough to buy me out—we won't let nobody but his banker in on it. Same way when me and Jack March ride into Keystone, and ditto fer Bullwhip. Then I happen tuh know how Shorty Larsen does his bankin' over the range at Fire Burn. This is goin' to work out finer'n frog hair. Don't s'pose any of you ranchers told your families or hired men where you was goin'? Yuh wouldn't, for bootin' me out was business yuh'd keep secret. Wal, the horse'll be on all of yuh."

CUTTIN' short details of what follows, right that very night Scrabble takes Rome Ives and rides to Keystone, tellin' Slug and Emmet that if he and Rome didn't show up before one o'clock they're to pour the lead into all of us as are left and light out themselves. Them two lizards take turns keepin' watch of us uncomfortable, downright miserable, but proddy fellers. Bullwhip tries to bribe 'em. Emmet sez his boss is goin' to raise fifty thousand simoleons and he'll pay 'em better'n we can.

Keepin' us apart so we can't get at each other's ropes, they sure keep watch of us. The night drags along and Scrabble returns with Rome, successful. Ho, but ain't that hombre elated! Quick as Rome is back in the house Slug ties him up again. 'Course Rome ain't tried to do a blamed thing to Scrabble, not darin' to risk our lives.

Rome (short for Jerome if you're curious 'bout that monicker) tells us later how, at Scrabble's order, he'd routed his banker outa bed and told him how he needed cash to buy Perkins' land immediately or Scrabble'd change his mind. The banker, knowin' Rome was honest and all, had dug up the cash and said they'd fix up the mortgage, notes and so on, later. I think it's the funniest predicament what five ranchers and one cowboy ever was in.

Scrabble picks on Shorty Larsen next, for it'll take quite a while to ride over the range to Fire Burn and back. They leave about two in the morning, Scrabble tellin' his helpers they'll be back right at nine. He won't wait for any bank to open. He'll get the banker out of bed.

The pair of 'em return all jake, and before nine. Again Scrabble has been successful. He now has thirty thousand dollars. But he's gettin' tired out from so much ridin', so he eats a good meal —not feedin' any of his prisoners though, as that'd be too much work— and hitches a team to a buckboard for his next ride to Keystone. This time he takes along Jack March, sayin' he'll be back at one-thirty. One-thirty rolls along. Scrabble's buckboard ain't in sight. Slug and Emmet finger their guns, scan the road and glance at us. I'm sure sweatin' blood for fear Jack has started something with old Scrabble Perkins. "Twenty-five minutes to two," announces Emmet, "Shall we—" He hauls out his barker.

"Guess so," grunts Slug. "Gosh I wish Scrabble had left all that dinero here, 'stead of totin' it on his carcass." He pulls out, fust one, then the other of his pair of lead chuckers, and looks to see as every chamber is full.

"Hold on, you wallopers!" I hollers. "Takes more time for a team to get to town and back than for saddle hosses. Give us 'nother half hour."

"Huh?" rumbles Slug. "The boss said ——"

"Here he comes!" Emmet yelps.

MUCH as we hate Scrabble Perkins, this time we're powerful glad to see him. Jack March is right with him, not havin' dared try any funny business.

"We didn't get 'long so good this trip," sez Scrabble, enterin' the room. "Jack's credit ain't no 'count. His land and stuff is all mortgaged a'ready. Best we could dig up was a couple thousand berries. One more trip and this game's over. Untie Bullwhip Maxwell, Emmet, an' lead him to the buckboard."

"This time, Scrabble, you allow yourself plenty of time," I calls out. "Them killers of yourn get powerful uneasy."

"Wal, I wouldn't care much if they did finish off you jaspers," returns the ornery walloper. "But me and Bullwhip'll be back at five o'clock—if Bullwhip shows sense."

"Oh, I'll be a good Indian," growls Bullwhip. "Not 'cause I'm scairt of my own neck, but 'cause I won't be responsible for the death of five innocent men, my friends. Scrabble, you're a devil ever to have thought of such a damnable scheme."

"Thanks for the compliment," sez Scrabble, powerful well pleased with hisself. "Let's go."

Help for us there seems to be none. Not one of the cowmen had told even their families where they were going, for this business of running out Perkins wasn't right accordin' to law and they'd not wanted it to leak out. The ranchers had just told their families and hired help they'd be gone for some indefinite time. Therefore there ain't nobody huntin' for any of us.

While Bullwhip and Scrabble are absent Demijohn manages to work loose the rope on his wrists. But it don't do no good, for Slug discovers what's up and hands my old boss a belt over the head with his Colt what floors Demijohn complete. After Emmet ties the old rancher up again, them two hard bitten reptiles discuss matters atween 'emselves while they wait for their boss.

"Scrabble's goin' to get atween forty and fifty thousand smackers outa this deal," I hear Emmet say. "That's a heap of jack, Slug, and he never did say how much he'd give us."

"Yeh, a heap of jack," grunts Slug a kinder avaricious gleam in his eyes. "Scrabble wouldn't ha' got but ten thousand if it hadn't been fer us. We'll make him kick through."

"I'm with yuh," says Emmet significant.

Watchin' them two human wolves I think about the old sayin' to the effect of "honor among thieves," though I doubt if Slug and Emmet has ever heard it. They look to me like hombres what'd double-cross their own brothers if they could make any money so doin'. They don't do a bloomin' thing but watch the trail and us tied jaspers until at last Scrabble returns with Bullwhip.

Like all the other ranchers, Bullwhip had been scairt to start anything with Scrabble Perkins; scairt to break the news to anybody in Keystone, as who wouldn't be when two killers was right on the job to bump off five men if anything went wrong with Scrabble's scheme.

BULLWHIP is brought into the house and tied up solid again. On his face is a helpless look of baffled fury, an expression now common to all of us. As for Scrabble, he's in high good spirits. His plan has worked out as well as he could possibly have hoped. Bullwhip had been able to raise the full ten thousand, and now Perkins ties all of his green- and yellow-backs into one package.

"Forty thousand thar," sez he, gloatin', "an' I got a lot of gold besides." Outa his pockets he digs ten and twenty dollar gold pieces and begins countin' 'em. Slug and Emmet, their wicked eyes shinin', moves in close to their boss.

"How much *we* get?" Slug asks.

"I'll pay yuh liberal," Scrabble stops his job long enough to say. "Put that deed to my ranch in Demijohn Kelly's pocket, Emmet. It should be made out different, seein' as all five of these 'commodatin' ranchers is payin' me for my land, but after I'm gone they can fight among 'emselves over who'll get it. Way the deed reads the land now belongs to Demijohn."

Emmet don't touch the deed lyin' on the table. "Slug asked yuh how much *we* get," he sez, polite enough, but had Scrabble looked into the eyes of either one of them toughs he'd 'a' been scairt.

However, he don't look at 'em. "Five hundred apiece," he remarks, "is what you birds get. Heres' yourn, Slug, all in gold, and here's yourn, Emmet. Yuh done good. I'm payin' yuh accordin'."

Scrabble looks up then, straight into the muzzle of Slug's Colt. "Wh—whh —— What's the——?" he gasps.

"Yuh damned cheap skate!" Slug snarls. "Down on the floor with yuh. Flat on yore belly. Yuh're goin' to get hog-tied, same as all these other wallopers. We're takin' the swag!"

Scrabble stares around wildly and sees both of Emmet's lead-chuckers out, too. "I'll—I'll split with yuh," he gasps. "Boys, don't yuh——"

"That cash splits better two ways than three," Emmet rasps. "Down on the floor with your paws behint yore back, Scrabble, afore I shoot yore lower jaw plum' off."

"That's the stuff, boys! Give the old tight-wad hell!" I yelps, notin' that the five ranchers are gettin' quite a kick outa this proceedin'.

"Shut up! We ain't askin' yore ad-

vice," Slug snarls, throwin' a glance at me and the others to make sure we're all plum' helpless and tied secure.

SCRABBLE begs and whines, but all his pleadin' does him no good. The two toughs take his gun, tie him and dump him over in one corner of the big room. Thus he's facin' all the rest of us hombres, who're scattered along the west and south walls. He's able to sit up and if ever a man's face and eyes showed stark terror his does, as he watches Slug and Emmet stow away all the cash in their clothes.

"What next?" asks Emmet of his pard.

"Watch these jiggers," orders Slug. "While I monkey all these guns."

He picks up rifles and six-shooters galore and packs 'em outside. Few minutes later I hear him pounding on the anvil down at Scrabble's blacksmith shop and know what's happenin'. He's probably smashin' the hammers on the Colts and bendin' the barrels on the rifles.

The hammerin' ceases and I hear horses bein' moved. Soon Slug appears at the door. "I turned loose that team as was hooked to the buckboard," sez he, "and I've got our saddle nags right out here in the yard, so we're ready to drift."

He stands for a moment lookin' us over. My hands is held behind my back just like they was, an' I'm hopin' neither tough comes to inspect 'em, for they'd find the rope on my wrists loose. Hours and hours of workin' has loosened it enough so my hands are free, though my ankles are still tied.

"Scrabble robbed you hombres, but we robbed him," sez Slug with a triumphant curl of his lips. "Yuh can have the satisfaction of hangin' him when yuh get loose, gents, but don't yuh try to foller us boys."

"Yuh *will* be a piker an' offer us a measly five hundred bucks apiece, Scrabble," growls Emmet, backin' outa the door after his pard. "So long, ranchers! May we never meet again!"

I hear the gravel crunchin' under their boots, and the way I have of untyin' that rope on my ankles ain't slow. I'd been rubbin my hands for quite a little while, and my legs ain't very numb as I get onto my feet and pussyfoot to the door, peekin' out ever so cautious. There in the yard, midway atween house and barn are two saddled horses, ropes at the saddle forks, but no rifles that I can see.

Slug and Emmet has reached them ponies, but I hear Emmet say, "Yuh turned loose the team, Slug, but did yuh turn all them saddle hosses out—them six belongin' to the ranchers an' that old cowpuncher, and two of Scrabbles?"

"Heck, no!" exclaims Slug. "I forgot 'em. 'Twas you as led them nags outa the yard and put 'em outa sight. Whar'd yuh——"

"Under that shed yonder. Come on. The both of us can get 'em turned loose quicker'n just one. Them hombres in the house can't get loose afore we do it. They can't do one thing nohow, 'cause they ain't no guns."

Emmet is already runnin' to the shed, and I'm tickled to see Slug foller him. They reach their objective, but they ain't outa sight of the house. I see 'em yankin' saddles and bridles off ponies in double-quick time. In the big room the ranchers has rolled close to each other and are busy untyin' knots. March hollers at me in a throaty whisper. "Come untie us, Fritz."

BUT I ain't thinkin' of untyin' them. There ain't a gun among the whole bunch of us. "Yuh'll be free quick enough," I hisses, "and when yuh do, hop out through that window an' take to the timber on the north of this shanty. Savvy?"

I throws one last look at Scrabble Perkins. Nobody ain't tryin' to untie him. I'll swear his heavy face looks green in the wanin' light of late afternoon. Cold beads of sweat glisten on it. Outa the window I look once again. Down at the shed Slug and Emmet has turned loose the last pony. I wanted to be sure all them horses was loose afore I acted, for I know there'll be no catchin' any one of 'em again out in the open as they are. Slug and Emmet are startin' back toward their saddled ponies, standin' bridle reins down.

I'm outa the house like a cat hit with a boot-jack and across the yard to them two ponies. I've caught the bridle reins of both and am up in the saddle on one, tryin' to lead the other. My heels dig into my mount's flanks. He leaps out, headed west, up the valley. 'Tother horse lags back. I ain't time to dally the bridle reins 'round the saddle horn.

They're whipped from my hand. No time to get 'em again. No time to scare that nag on ahead of me.

Slug and Emmet has seen me, 'course. They've stopped. Their Colts are out. *Ping! Spang! Roar!* The air's shattered by the savage bark of them smoke wagons. Lordy, how the lead slugs is whinin' all about me! I can hear 'em sing in my ears. I can smell 'em, taste 'em. But both gun slingers are shootin' high, not wantin' to cripple or kill the horse I'm on, and oh, man! how that pony is quittin' the earth!

A matter of seconds and me and the hoss, both unhit except for slight nicks, are outa range. Outa the tail of my eye I see Slug scootin' to the pony what had broke loose from me. If only I'd ben able to get that hoss away from there I'd 'a' had both toughs afoot. Slug reaches the bronc, hops to the saddle. He's a hundred yards or so behind me, but comin' hell-bent, spurrin' vicious.

I see somethin' else too, just afore I pass outa sight of the shanty. Five ranchers is poppin' out through a window, one after another, takin' to the thick timber north of the house like prairie dogs to their holes. Good! Them ranchers'll be hid so Emmet can't shoot 'em if he's a mind to.

Slug must 'a' seen 'em leavin' the house, but he ain't wastin' any shots on them. He's after me; wants that hoss for his pard; needs it. I'll say the reptile's after me. He's gainin' as we zip up the narrow valley along a trail that runs between patches of timber. I'd have the advantage of him if I had a gun. How'll I get him without no gun?

AN IDEA pops into my head. No sooner corralled than put into execution. The rope at my saddle fork comes loose in my right hand. I knot the bridle reins 'round the saddle horn, wait until I'm out of Slug's sight, around a slight turn where there's a grove of aspens at my right, then I leave that racing pony's back in one wild leap.

Plump! I hit the ground, lose my feet, somersault, get up and scoot to the shelter of the aspens. I'm spinnin' out a loop in my rope as I run. It's the work of a jiffy to throw a hitch around one of them small trees with the other end of that rope, and I'm ready for the tough hombre named Slug.

Ready not a second too soon, for here he comes, his horse stretched out flat, zippin' past the grove like a shot from a gun slug's bent forward like a jockey, Colt in his right fist, spurs buried in the hoss's flanks. The murderous look in that snake's eyes! 'Course he hears my mount tearin' on up the valley, and he ain't lookin' for no trap. He's past me. With a rope it's a long shot and a hard shot, but my throw is true. My loop snares that thievin' walloper right around his neck. On races the hoss. The rope sings as it snaps taut. The tree it's tied to shakes and is pretty nigh jerked loose, as *whack!* Slug, yanked from his saddle, hits the ground.

In roping wild steers I've broken the necks of not a few, and twice I've broken horses' necks with a rope, accidents which I bitterly regretted. But I feel no regret whatever as I stoop over Slug's body. Collectin' both his Colts and his gun belt, as well as all the money he had on his body, I run on up the valley a little way, to discover that the critter Slug was riding has stopped. The bridle reins come down, 'course.

I catch the bronc and start back to match gun fire with Emmet, who I expect'll be at the ranch, either trying to catch a horse or else waiting for Slug. But I run into him most awful unexpected like, comin' along up the trail. doubtless hopin' his pard has overtaken me. He sees and recognizes me one split second afore I see him.

Out and up comes Emmet's gun. I yank on the birdle and the hoss rears, getin' right in its neck the tough's first lead slug, intended for me. Staggerin', squealin', the animal goes down. Emmet cuts loose again and by some freak chance the bullet strikes my saddle horn, ricochets into space with a snarling whine. By that time my Colt has spoken. Ye-ah, it booms even as the hoss falls and I kick my feet free of the stirrups, leapin' aside. Emmet's arms go wide as all control of 'em is lost. Staggering, down he slumps, a small hole above his left eye.

I put a bullet through the hoss's head to put it out of its misery, make another collection of guns and cash, and trot down the trail to the ranch. Nobody in the house but Scrabble Perkins, still tied solid. He don't look very happy,

not near as happy as I do as I step outside and yell, "Everything's jake, men! It's me, old Fitz."

Voices answer, and soon out of the timber appear Demijohn Kelly with a lump on his head, Shorty Larsen, Bullwhip Maxwell and Rome Ives. Jack March, they report, has taken his foot in his hand and legged it for his ranch, which is the closest, to get help and horses and guns. What have I done?

"Slug tried with his neck to bust a rope what was tied to a tree," sez I. "But 'twasn't the rope he busted. Emmet's up the trail thar little ways. First aid won't do him no good. Here's all that dinero, men, and now what yuh aim to do with Scrabble Perkins? I'd suggest tyin' him to the tail of a wild bronc and lettin' him ride outa the country that way."

"Yuh're a pretty hard-bitten old rannyhan, Fitz," sez Bullwhip, eyein' me with a sight more respect than he ever showed me afore, "But I dunno but what yuh're right about Scrabble. How 'bout it, Demijohn?"

DEMIJOHN KELLY thinks matters over for a minute. "Perkins ain't a white man," sez he. "Ain't nothin' white about him. But we called on him to buy his ranch and send him out of our country. Guess we'll hand him a fair price for his land and let him pull his freight."

"Huh?" I gasps. "Yuh ain't goin' to make that sidewinder's feet itch for the grass of Uncle Sam?"

"There's been enough killing over this business," returns Demijohn. "Don't you other men think so?"

"Well—yes," sez Bullwhip. "But——

"Scrabble is certain to keep his mouth shut about these two helpers of his who double-crossed him," announced Demijohn. "There are too many witnesses for him to dare talk. He'll never dare come back here either."

The old rancher walks into the house, us a-followin'. There he cuts the ropes holdin' Scrabble Perkins, but that hombre is so scairt he can't stand.

"Here's the money for your ranch," says Demijohn, layin' the cash on the table and pickin' up the deed, which he puts in his pocket. "Same proposition we offered you las' night, Scrabble. You've got ten hours to make yourself scarce."

Scrabble Perkins don't need ten hours. All he needs is time enough to get a horse under him after the bunch of us are able to corral the ponies Slug and Emmet turned loose. The ornery old walloper, who'd tried to hog Demijohn Spring, for hisself, seems powerful glad to go and surprised that we let him.

There's peace in Demijohn Basin now, and all the little cow outfits—there ain't any very big ones—get along together like one big family, only better. All the barbed wire on the fence around Demi-John Spring, has been coiled up, and hauled away to different ranches, while no water ever runs in the ditch leadin' to the dry, sage-brush flat. The grass close 'round the big spring is chawed plum' into the ground, and deep, worn trails lead to the water hole from north, east, south and west. Afternoons you can see a thousand cattle bunched there. They've filled up on water and are restin', gruntin', chewin' their cuds afore they go meanderin' back into the hills.

Recently I heard a stranger who'd noticed the attractiveness of Demijohn Spring as a homestead site, ask Sheriff Ora Ross about it.

"I'd advise yuh not to file on that land, partner," sez the sheriff, tuggin' thoughtful at his heavy mustache. "A hombre name of Scrabble Perkins did file on it oncet. None of the cowmen'll tell one bloomin' thing of what happened, and all I know is that Scrabble left the country sudden and never came back. Demijohn Kelly had a deed to Scrabble's ranch, which made Demijohn the big man of the basin, but he ain't never tried to hog that water none.

"What's that? Did Perkins ever prove up on that land surroundin' the spring? I'll say he didn't. These basin cowmen consider that public property and they wouldn't let no man prove up on it. Again I say: Let it alone, for there's times and occasions when even a John Law like me don't have no control over them cowmen—none whatever. Ho-hum, I'd like to know what they said or done to Scrabble Perkins as made him pull his freight. He was a tough nut, that Perkins, and ornery. I know well he hadn't no intention of bein' run out. But he was."

WARNED

By

GRIFF CRAWFORD

OH, nothing would do, Mr. Syracuse Dan,
But saddle his bronc and ride down to Cheyenne.

His manner was chesty, his trappings were light,
His guns swinging easy, all set for a fight.
He whistled an air as he ambled along—
And now and then tackled the words of a song.

Remember, I warned Mr. Syracuse Dan,
He'd better look out if he rode to Cheyenne.

He dealt to himself—with remarkable skill—
Four aces, which left him no reason to fill—
And so at the draw he remarked blandly that
He'd play what he held—he was standing them pat.

I surely felt sorry for Syracuse Dan—
To get in a game in the town of Cheyenne.

The betting was strong and the pot of a size
To make all the poker fiends gasp in surprise—
They dropped, here and there, till at last but one man
Was bucking the tilts of our Syracuse Dan.

Four aces are good for a win any time
Except in Cheyenne—where they're not worth a dime.

At last came the call and our Syracuse spread
His hand on the table—"Four aces—" he said.
The other man grinned—"Part, I caught in the run
"Two deuces, a jack and a six—and a gun."

"That's beatin' four aces," said Syracuse Dan,
Then straddled his bronc and rode out from Cheyenne.

By W. C. TUTTLE

Sad Sontag finds himself hated by the cattlemen and hunted by the sheepmen.

Part II

LEAD LANGUAGE

BEGIN HERE—YOU'VE ONLY MISSED ONE PART

DEPUTY SHERIFF TINY PARKER, of Sinking River, took another drink and became very expansive toward his new friends.

"I tell you, Sontag," he said, for his friends were Sad Sontag and Swede Harrigan whom Tiny had every reason to believe were wanted for the shooting of Dan Reynolds, the sheepman. "If Dan Reynolds could ever get his sheep over that Rim it would be the end of Sinking River as a cattle range. That's the reason the Two Bar JP, the Circle R and the Bar 44 always keep lookouts up there on the Rim. They got dynamite and fire signals all fixed so the minute they see sheep they can tell the whole valley. And six good men could hold the Rim against a' army."

"Couldn't Reynolds bring his sheep up through the desert?" Sad asked.

"No, it's too far around," Tiny explained. "An' anyway there's a big salty cow outfit down that way, The Flying M, an' a couple of smaller outfits. Reynolds could never get his sheep by those cowmen."

"How's the law feel about all this?" Sad wanted to know.

"Well," replied the deputy, "both me an' the sheriff, Stormy See is his handle, used to be cowpunchers, but the law o'course is impartial. Reynolds, though, pulled one stunt we didn't like. He sent his son, Gale Reynolds, in here under a false name and had him go to work on the Two Bar JP. Gale right away began makin' love to Jean Proctor. She owns

Author of "The Valley of Twisted Trails," and many other Sad Sontag stories.

an' has been running the outfit since her daddy was killed. Then one night Gale got drunk and spilled the works. They run Gale out right there and then. Johnny Caldwell, he's one of Jean Proctor's hands and is pretty sweet on his boss, sure was huntin' blood. We figgered that was the end of Gale, but darned if he didn't show up again an' try to see Jean. Somebody plugged him 'fore Jean could learn why he'd come back. The boy didn't die and we were docterin' him here in town, when a bunch o' masked bandits come in and kidnapped him. They seemed to be treating him gentle and not wanting to hurt him, and I know damn well it wasn't none of the cattlemen, but that's the last we've seen of Gale."

Sad was interested in the Sinking River troubles and continued to question Tiny, though actually Sontag and Swede had had nothing to do with the shooting of the sheepman. Through the chance of an automobile crash in San Francisco they had saved Reynold's life from some city gangsters. Reynolds had taken them to his home and the two punchers had been in the house when the sheepman had been mysteriously shot and badly wounded. Naturally Sad and Swede were suspected and had had to leave the city in a hurry.

"Who's the Two Bar JP foreman?" Sad casually asked the friendly deputy.

"Bill Steen," came the reply. "He's a real cowman and sure hates sheep. Used to work for the Flying M down on the desert."

Sad and Swede exchanged glances. There might be two Steens in the country, but probably not. And on Reynolds' table in his Frisco home there had been a wire explaining conditions in Sinking River and signed "Steen."

Sad and Swede left Tiny and ambled down the street to think this over. Sheriff Stormy See saw them and a worried frown creased his forehead. He had just lied to Jean Proctor about them, saying they were old friends of his and recommending them for jobs on the Two Bar JP, when actually he had never seen them before, and all he knew about them was that they were wanted in Frisco for the shooting of Dan Reynolds. Stormy swore to himself. It had all happened because the first thing Sad had done when he hit town was to save the life of little Buddy Fowler from a bunch of stampeding steers. And little Buddy, the five-year-old son of the blacksmith, was the town pet. Stormy had wired Frisco that the men they wanted were not in Sinking River.

So Sad and Swede went to work for the Two Bar JP. On the way out to the ranch they learned more about the country from Jean Proctor herself. They stopped at the circle R and met Jeff Ellis, the foreman. He explained that Dell Rios, the owner, was away in Frisco for a few weeks. They also met Hewie Moore, the little firey old-time cowman who owned the Bar 44, and Aunt Ida, his wife who was big and given to scripture reading.

At the Two Bar JP they met Bill Steen, Jean's foreman. Steen was far from friendly and didn't like Jean's having hired new hands without consulting him. The other boys, though, seemed to take to Sad and Swede, particularly the likable young Johnny Caldwell. Johnny showed Sad and Swede around.

In the mean time Sheriff Stormy See had received a wire from Frisco stating that Reynolds had regained consciousness and cleared Sad and Swede of any connection with the shooting and added that Sad and Swede had been visiting the sheepman. This wire meant but one thing to Stormy: *Sad and Swede must be working for the sheepman.*

Stormy immediately went out and confessed his fears to Jean. They agreed to watch the new hands closely. A few days later Steen brought out a wire from Reynolds to Sad. In Jean's eyes it was proof that Sad and Swede were working for Reynolds. To Sad and Swede it meant that the sheepmen wanted them off the Two Bar JP. Realizing that now they would be hunted by both the sheepmen and the cattlemen Sad and Swede returned to town.

Chapter VII

NEW JOBS

SAD and Swede had not been back in Sinking River an hour, before Sad realized that Bill Steen had told others about that telegram. Sheriff Stormy See was coldly cordial, and Deputy Tiny Parker seemed to try and avoid them. Swede did not notice it, not being of a sensitive nature. If people were kind to Swede he was duly grateful; if not, he did not pay any attention. Sad was different. He instinctively felt the mood of those about him, and he was able to read a man's feelings and reactions, especially if he had had any chance to observe the man under different emotions.

And Sad realized that Sinking River was partly hostile toward him and Swede. At a saloon near the depot next day he found Jim Farraday of the Flying M and three of his men. Farraday was a big, burly, hard-faced cowman, partly drunk now. Sad did not know Farraday, but as Sad passed the group at the bar, a voice barked almost in his ear, "Yo're a long ways off yore own range, ain't yuh, Sontag?"

Sad turned quickly to face a man, larger than he; a man with a long crooked nose, a scarred upper lip and a pointed chin. Sad knew him in a flash. It was Lee Welch, whom he had arrested for stealing horses in the Sundown country. Lee had proved an alibi, which Sad had never believed, and had saved himself a long sentence.

"Hello, Welch," Sad said evenly. "You livin' here now?"

"Seem to be, don't I?" rather sarcastically.

"Ask yore friend to have a drink with us," said Farraday to Lee.

"Like hell, I will!" snapped Welch. "No damn sheriff drinks with me."

Sad's eyes shifted to Farraday. The big man was grinning in anticipation of trouble.

"Thank yuh kindly," said Sad slowly, "but I'm not drinkin'."

He turned back to Welch. "And I'm not a sheriff now, Welch."

"No-o-o-o?" Welch looked him over curiously. "Sundown got wise to herself, eh? What beats me is how in hell fellers like you ever git to be sheriff."

"That's easy," drawled Sad, cool as ever, "They elect sheriffs like me to catch horse-thieves like you, Welch."

Welch snapped an unprintable epithet and grabbed for his gun, both hands down. In that fractional part of a second it takes for a gunman to draw and shoot, Sad's right fist hooked under Welch's pointed chin with every ounce of Sad's sinewy body behind it.

If Welch had been shot through the heart, he would not have fallen any quicker. The other three Flying M men yanked away from the bar, and Lentz, a tow-headed cowboy, drew his gun, but Farraday knocked it out of his hand.

"You fool!" snarled Farraday. "Welch had all the best of the break; so you keep out of it, Lentz."

Lentz picked up his gun and snapped it into the holster. Sad shifted his eyes to Farraday, nodding quickly. "Thank yuh, pardner."

"Welch acts like his neck was broke," offered the bartender.

"More likely his heart," said Sad. "If I remember rightly, Welch had an idea he was fast with a gun."

FARRADAY shifted his eyes from the unconscious Welch and looked at Sontag.

"How come yuh didn't break for yore own gun?" he asked.

"I didn't want to kill him," said Sad.

"Think yuh could?"

"Unless he can draw faster than that."

Farraday held out his hand to Sontag.

"My name's Farraday," he said. "I run the Flyin' M outfits out of here."

Sad accepted his outstretched hand and said, "My name's Sontag."

Welch recovered enough to sit up, but he was still hazy. His eyes looked blankly around and he tried to smile. He spat painfully and got back to his feet, holding to the bar. It required a full minute after he was up to realize what had happened. The punch had driven the whiskey from his brain and left a headache in its stead. He looked at Sad, and a light of understanding came into his eyes.

"I remember now," he said unsteadily. "Over in Sundown, they said you could hit like the kick of a mule. I believe it. Well, I dunno what it was all about now, but I reckon I got what I was lookin' for. Now, I'd like to buy a drink."

"I'll take a drink," smiled Sad. "I'm thirsty now."

Farraday introduced him to the other two cowboys.

"You workin' around here?" asked Bowers, a thin, wiry, swarthy faced cowboy.

"Been with the Two Bar JP."

"How's things up there?" asked Farraday.

"Fine enough."

"Girl runnin' the place, eh?" laughed Lentz.

"And runnin' it well, too. They've got all the help they can use; so me and my pardner pulled out today. Welch, you remember Swede Harrigan."

"Used to was yore deputy? Shore, I remember him. Is he with yuh?"

"Yeah. How are you fixed for help, Farraday?"

"Full up, Sontag. Sorry I can't use yuh."

"Oh, that's all right."

A little later Farraday met Stormy See on the street. Farraday was curious about Sontag, and asked Stormy who he was.

"You've kinda got me," admitted Stormy, and told Farraday what he knew about Sad. Steen had showed Stormy that Reynolds telegram, and Stormy told Farraday about it.

"And I've got a hunch that Jean Proctor fired Sontag and Harrigan on account of that telegram, 'cause it shore proves that both of 'em are workin' for Reynolds. But anybody that says anythin' worse than that about Sontag has got me to whip. I seen him pile right out in front of a bunch of steers, runnin' wild, and save a little kid's life. He may be workin' for the sheep interests, but he's a man."

Farraday had learned all he could, and a little later he met Sad and Swede in front of the postoffice. Sad had seen Farraday and Stormy standing in front of the sheriff's office, and he wondered if he was the subject of their conversation.

"I've been thinkin' it over, Sontag," Farraday said. "And it kinda strikes me that I might use you two fellers. I pay fifty a month."

"All right," nodded Sad. "You'll have to furnish ridin' rigs, until we make a little money."

"That's easy enough. I'll get yuh a couple horses at the livery stable, and we can send 'em back later."

SAD'S eyes showed a certain amount of amusement, as he watched the boss of the Flying M go across the street. Then he told Swede about Welch, and their fight in the saloon.

"Well, what's that son of a pelican doin' here?" wondered Swede.

"Workin' for the Flyin' M," Sad told him. "He shore grew horns for a minute, but I sawed 'em off quick. But don't go too strong on his friendship. I'd as soon trust a rattler. He made up to me right away, but he ain't the kind to take a sock on the chin and forget it. And the rest of the crew are as salty as the sea, Swede. Jist remember that Farraday packs a gun on his hip and another under his shoulder."

"Must be expectin' somethin', eh?"

"Packin' hardware thataway," grinned Sad. "Go on over and let Welch act glad to meet yuh, while I see the sheriff a minute."

Sad found Stormy at his office.

"We've quit the Proctor outfit," he told the sheriff.

"I thought likely you would, Sontag."

"I suppose Bill Steen showed you that telegram?"

Stormy's ears grew red, as he nodded his head.

"I reckon Bill spread the glad tidin's pretty thoroughly, didn't he?" asked Sad.

"We're all cattle folks up here," said the sheriff stiffly. "But what made yuh think I'd seen it?"

"Well," Sad laughed shortly, "I'd gather that much from Farraday's talk with me a while ago."

"Lot of damn old women around here!" snorted Stormy. "Yuh can't tell a thing without it bein' told."

"Oh, it's all right with me, Stormy."

The sheriff got to his feet and looked keenly at Sontag. Finally he held out his hand.

"I don't give a damn who yo're workin' for," he said evenly. "I'll never forget how yuh scooped that kid away from them steers."

They shook hands solemnly, and Sad went back to join Farraday's outfit, a grin on his lips.

Chapter VIII

MURDER

SOUTH of Sinking River the character of the country changes quickly. Cottonwoods and willows gradually disappear, and the greasewood takes its place. Two miles south of the town is a semi-desert, no streams, no water-holes. Creaking windmills rear their gaunt heads from the shallow canyons, working constantly for the small trickle of water which is carefully hoarded in the man-made pools.

Thousands of acres were controlled by the Flying M outfit. To the south of them were the Box AA and the Lazy N. They were not big outfits, employing not more than two or three men.

The Flying M was not a pretentious group of buildings. The ranch house was a rambling old structure, weathered, badly in need of repair. The bunkhouse was a long, low building, capable of housing at least thirty men. Two old windmills creaked and groaned at the main ranch, where concrete tanks held the meager supply. The stable was a tall, sway-backed building, and there were numerous sheds and corrals.

There were no women at the ranch. Sad and Swede were introduced to Tony Zunega and Juan Garcia, a couple of Mexican horse wranglers, Doc Bladen and Buck Terrill, two punchers, and "Welcome" Holliday, the cook.

Bladen struck Sad as being a city man, dissipated, educated far beyond the rest of them, cynical to the point of being sarcastic. He had a broad, high forehead, greenish gray eyes, well-shaped nose and a thin-lipped mouth. In age, he could have been thirty or fifty.

Holliday, the cook, was sixty, his round head covered with sparse gray hair, squint-eyed, a broken nose, which had never been set, few teeth left behind his sagging lips, and a scarred chin. If any man ever showed the scars of battle, Welcome Holliday did. Buck Terrill was small, wiry, bow-legged, with the face of a ferret, and small brown eyes, like a monkey.

Welch told Sad that Doc Bladen did little work on the range, but spent most of his time playing cribbage with Farraday. Terrill was foreman for the Flying M, but took his orders from Farraday. Zunega and Garcia were more Yaqui than Spanish, and they spoke English with difficulty.

Neither Sad nor Swede liked the atmosphere of the Flying M. There seemed to be a strained feeling about the place. There was none of the rough badinage of the ordinary cow outfit. Welch showed them their bunks, and let them select their riding rigs at the saddle shed, where there was a number of fairly good saddles and bridles.

"Yuh can pick yore mounts from the remuda in the mornin'," said Welch. "We've got plenty, and a lot of 'em need ridin' out. You boys ain't particular if a horse pitches a little, are yuh?"

"No, we don't mind," said Sad. "We take 'em as they come, but we ain't goin' to appreciate anybody handin' us buckin' horses that ain't broke to handlin' cows."

"Oh, we wouldn't do that, Sontag."

"I jist mentioned that end of it," said Sad coldly, " 'cause me and Swede didn't come down here to entertain an audience."

"Shore yuh didn't. I'll pick out some stuff I know is good, and you won't

git anythin' we ain't already used. I'm already thinkin' about a couple cuttin' horses in that remuda that are top-notchers, but need work, and I'll see that you git 'em."

SUPPER at the Flying M was rather a quiet affair. They served good food, but the conversation dragged. Sad noted that both Farraday and Doc Bladen were half-drunk. Another thing that seemed queer was a sign on the door leading from the dining room, which said: NO ADMITTANCE, EXCEPT ON BUSINESS.

This was unusual at a ranch where there were no women, as the men usually had the run of the place.

"Farraday, Doc Bladen and Buck Terrill sleep in the ranch house," explained Welch.

"That feller Bladen seems like a queer sort to be around here," remarked Sad.

"Yeah, he shore is," agreed Welch. "Jist between me and you, I believe Doc is a hop-head. He's from Frisco, but he's been here six months. Not a damn bit of good as a puncher, but he's smart as the devil. Farraday tell me that he's a real doctor, but his health broke down and he had to quit. Sometimes his eyes git kinda glassy, and he don't see yuh at all. I asked Farraday if Doc wasn't a dope fiend, and Farraday told me to mind my own damn business—which answered the question pretty good."

"How did he happen to come out here?" queried Sad.

"Reynolds sent him," confided Welch softly. "You knowed Dan Reynolds owns this layout, don'tcha?"

"Shore, I knowed he did," lied Sad easily.

"Well, I reckon Doc was mixed up with Reynolds in Frisco. I dunno for shore, but from what I can learn, Reynolds is mixed up in the drug business over there. Of course, this ain't to be told around—mebbe you know about it."

"I'd heard the same thing, Welch. No, Reynolds didn't tell me. He ain't the kind that tells things like that."

"No, he's pretty close-mouthed. You knowed he got shot, didn't yuh? Well, I'm bettin' it was some of that bunch he works against that got him."

"Will Reynolds come out here?" asked Sad.

"As soon as he's able to travel, I s'pose."

Sad nodded thoughtfully. "When they write to him, do they use the name of Jim X. Smith?"

"Yea-a-ah," laughed Welch. "Do you?"

"That's why I wondered if yore outfit did," smiled Sad.

Swede listened blankly, marveling that Sad knew these things. It was all rather mystifying to Swede, who was smart enough to keep his mouth shut and look wise.

A little later Welch went up to the house, where he found Bladen, Terrill and Farraday, having a drink in the main room.

"Well?" queried Farraday.

"All right," nodded Welch, and helped himself to a drink. "Sad knows all about everythin'. Even asked me if we knew Reynolds as Jim X. Smith."

Farraday nodded as though satisfied. Terrill flung his cigarette in the fireplace.

"Jist the same," he said slowly, "I'd go easy with 'em, Jim, until I found out more about 'em. When Reynolds tells me they're all right, I'll trust 'em. You ain't got a thing to prove what they are."

Bladen laughed and reached for the whisky bottle.

"You're as suspicious as an old lady, Buck."

"You spend four years in the penitentiary, and you'll be suspicious yourself, Doc."

"Well," grinned Welch, "this same Sontag almost had me ticketed for a nice stretch, but I proved an alibi."

"And then tried to get even with him for it," laughed Farraday.

WELCH scowled, as he helped himself to a drink.

"That ain't the end of the story," he said coldly.

"Better lay off him," grinned Terrill. "Jim told us what happened."

"I'm no damn fool," grunted Welch. "Better men than me have tried to whip him with their hands—or guns. I was half-drunk or I wouldn't have tried to throw down on him today; but I'm payin' for it with a sore jaw. I'm not kickin' nor provin' an alibi. He can whip me with his hands and I'm not sayin' he couldn't draw and shoot faster

than I can. But even at that, I'm not through with him."

"Well said!" applauded Bladen. "You are the first horse-thief I have ever known that wasn't suffering from exaggerated ego."

"Drop that," snarled Welch.

"Drop what?" snapped Bladen.

"Callin' me a horse-thief."

Doc straightened in his chair, his eyes boring straight at Welch.

"Cool down, you fool!" growled Terrill.

"No damn hophead can call me a horse-thief," gritted Welch.

Bladen had no gun in sight, no one saw him draw it; it was just there in his right hand, a snub-nosed automatic, going *spit! spit! spit! spit!* and Welch was caving in at the waist-line, his right hand clawing up and down his holster, nerveless to grasp anything, working automatically.

Then Welch crashed down in a heap in a sitting position, sliding sideways on his shoulder and turning over on his face.

"God!" exclaimed Terrill. "You got him, Doc!"

Bladen's face was white, his lips a penciled line, as he eyed the other two men.

"It was self-defense," said Bladen coldly. "He was reaching for his gun."

"I suppose he was," replied Farraday. "Yeah, I guess you're right, Doc."

The men in the bunkhouse barely heard the four muffled reports of the automatic. Lentz got to his feet and stepped to the door.

"Was them shots?" asked Bowers.

"Sounded like it," said Lentz. "Bladen packs one of them automatics, and they don't make much noise."

Lentz stood in the doorway, watching the house, when someone came out.

"Here comes Farraday," he said, and in a moment the big man came up to the door.

"Welch and Bladen had a run-in a few minutes ago," said Farraday.

"Welch reached for his gun, but Doc beat him to it. Welch is dead."

The men crowded up to the doorway.

"Bowers," said Farraday, "you ride to Sinkin' River with Terrill. The sheriff and coroner have to be notified. The rest of yuh forget it. You had nothin' to do with it." He glanced sharply at Sontag. "Bladen probably saved you trouble, Sontag," he said. "Welch said he would git you for that punch yuh gave him today."

"My thanks to Doc Bladen," said Sad evenly, "but I'd sooner do my own shootin'. I had nothin' against Welch. I arrested him for stealin' horses, when I was sheriff. It wasn't anythin' personal."

"I know," nodded Farraday and went away, followed by Bowers.

THE boys drifted outside, filled with curiosity, watching Bowers and Terrill saddle for their ride to town. Sad and Swede were in the deep shadows at the rear of the house as Terrill and Bowers rode swiftly away.

"Sad, there's somethin' wrong about this place," said Swede softly. "I dunno what it is, but I don't feel right."

Sad laughed softly. "I've got a hunch it won't be so good for us, but I dunno jist what to do about it. I don't like to stick against odds like this, but—here's what I do know, Swede: Reynolds owns this place. They communicate with Reynolds under the name of Jim X. Smith, and——"

"How did you ever find that out, Sad?"

"Steen posted a letter with that name on it. Dell Rios stole the letter, read it, and I stole it from Dell."

Swede whistled softly. "I wondered how yuh knew so much. But this feller Steen—is he Bill Steen, the Two Bar JP foreman?"

"That's the whippoorwill. Remember that telegram on the table in Reynolds' place in San Francisco? That was from Bill Steen. He's Reynolds' man—and foreman for Jean Proctor."

"The dirty coyote! But what about Dell Rios? Ain't he got the goods on Steen?"

"That's a question. The letter sounded queer, unless yuh skipped every other line. Didn't make a lot of sense, except that it told Reynolds that everythin' was all right. I destroyed the letter."

"I'll be darned. But, Sad, what do yuh make of that telegram from Reynolds, tellin' us——"

"Probably from Reynolds, I reckon—but mebbe Steen told him what to wire us. It was a scheme to disrate us at the Two Bar JP. They want us out

of the country, don'tcha see it? They don't want us up there, because they've laid their plans to put sheep into that range."

"Well, wouldn't that make yuh fight yore hat! What's to be done?"

"I wish I knew. We might tell the whole story to Jean Proctor, and not be able to prove it. She suspects us. In fact, she *knows* we're employed by Reynolds, and we'd waste our breath talkin' to her. Pardner, I can already smell sheep on the north range of the Sinkin' River."

"That's true. I wish——"

"Sh-h-h-h-h!" warned Sad.

Two horseman had turned in at the gate and were riding up to the house. At first they thought it was Bowers and Terrill coming back, but they saw that one man was riding a white horse. The newcomers rode up to the porch and dismounted. Sad and Swede slipped around the opposite side of the house and halted at the edge of the front porch, as the two men went up the steps.

Farraday, inside, heard his visitors and flung the door open. The visitors were Bill Steen and Jeff Ellis, foreman of the Dell Rios outfit.

"Hello, Jim," grunted Steen.

"Hello, Bill; what brings you here tonight?"

"Plenty. Say, we met Terrill and Bowers. So Welch got his, eh? Where's Sontag? Stormy told me in town you had put on Sontag and Harrigan?"

"They're down in the bunkhouse with the rest of the boys. Shut the door."

When the door shut Sad took a chance, slid through the porch railing and dropped on his knees beside the door. It was not a well-fitting front door, and he was able to distinguish nearly everything that was said. Steen was talking.

"—telegram was a fake, Jim," Steen said. "I had it sent, 'cause I figured to git them two away from the Two Bar JP, don'tcha see? Reynolds don't know 'em, except they was all together in an automobile wreck and Reynolds took 'em home with him. That was the night he got shot. He says he don't know whether they shot him or not, but don't believe they did. Anyway, I sent a wire to the Cattlemen's Association to see if they knew anythin' about 'em, and here's their reply: 'Sontag is a first class man and has done great work for us in several rustling deals stop Can not recommend him too highly. John Copely.'"

"That don't look so damn good," said Farraday.

"Good?" Bladen laughed harshly. "Remember what Welch said?"

"That's right! Welch said that Sontag knew everythin'. Knew we sent our letters to Jim X. Smith. Do you suppose somebody had the Association send him over here?"

"Sure thing," grunted Bladen. "If you wasn't so damn dumb——"

"You better git yore hands on this feller right away," advised Ellis, the Dell Rios foreman.

IT WAS then that Sad slipped off the porch. Thirty seconds later he and Swede were mounting a dark bay and a white horse, the same horses that had been ridden by Steen and Ellis. The two punchers were far enough away from the house to make a safe getaway, and to still see the light from the bunkhouse doorway, as one of the visitors went into the bunkhouse to summon them before the tribunal.

"This here comes under the headin' of horse stealin', don't it?" asked Swede, as they galloped along the road which led to Sinking River.

"I'm afraid our friends back at the Flyin' M might be a little inclined to say it is, but we can't be bothered over a little thing like that."

It did not require more than a few minutes for those at the Flying M to discover that Sad and Swede were not in the bunkhouse. The rest of the boys said they had not seen Sontag nor Harrigan since Terrill and Bowers had left for town.

And then Bill Steen discovered that their two horses were gone. He cursed bitterly, as did Ellis.

"They saw you come here," declared Farraday disgustedly. "Sontag is no fool. He either heard what was said, or guessed it. Now, we're in a hell of a hole. He'll go back to the Two Bar JP, tell what he knows, and you two jiggers will get a hot bullet when yuh go back."

"Why can'tcha let us have a couple fast horses?" asked Ellis. "We might catch 'em. The horses they've got are tired."

"If you were following the trail of

two fools—yes," said Bladen. "Don't you suppose they'd expect you to chase 'em. Go back and brazen it out. You've got the best of 'em. Miss Proctor won't believe them."

"Mebbe not. Hell, we've got to take that chance. Nobody knows we came down here."

"Yeah, and you better go back pretty careful," advised Farraday. "You'd prob'ly meet Terrill and Bowers with the sheriff and the coroner, and they might wonder where you've been."

"That's right. I reckon we better stay here until they show up, and then sneak out for home."

"Let's have a drink," suggested Bladen.

"Bring it out to the bunkhouse," said Steen. "I don't like to go in there—with that *thing* on the cot."

"He can't hurt you," laughed Bladen. "Only live men can hurt you. However, if you are afraid of death, I'll bring the whisky out."

"Was it self-defense, Jim?" asked Steen, after Bladen left them.

"What's the difference?" growled Farraday. "Three of us saw it."

"I wish it had been Sontag," growled Ellis.

"Blame yourself for comin' in so openly."

"I dunno," said Steen softly. "Welch was pretty much of a mouthy fool, and he wasn't so fast with a gun. Some of us might have gone out before Sontag did."

"Some truth in that. Here comes Bladen with the liquor."

Luckily Sad and Swede saw the two men from the Flying M, the sheriff, deputy and coroner, come over the top of a rise in the moonlight, and swung off the road, until the five riders passed. They rode on to Sinking River, where they dismounted on the dark side of the street, removed the bridles and tied them on the saddles. Then they turned the two tired horses loose, and went to the little hotel.

"You fellers didn't stay away long, didja?" observed the sleepy old proprietor, as he lighted their way with a lamp.

"We like yore place," grinned Sontag.

"You fellers are all right, by golly. Most everybody else kicks about the place. I heered tonight that there'd been a shootin' scrape out at the Flyin' M. Feller named Welch got drilled fulla holes. Self-dee-fense, they said. Ho, ho, ho! We-e-e-ell, that's all right, too. Boys will be boys, and liars will stick together, they say. Here's yore room, and may yuh have pleasant dreams. I allus feel lucky when I git to sell a four-bit room this time of night."

"We're lucky to be here," smiled Sad.

Chapter IX

HELP!

IT WAS nearly morning when Welch's body was brought to town. Farraday, Bladen and Terrill came in with it, because the sheriff promised an early inquest, although there was no question what the verdict would be. From their hotel window Sad and Swede saw the three men from the Flying M, sauntering in and out of a saloon.

"Kinda lookin' for us," grinned Swede. "What's our move, Sad?"

"Stay where we are," replied Sad, as he polished the barrel of his Colt six-shooter with a handkerchief. "I'm not fool enough to believe in takin' big chances. Any one of them three would love to take a shot at us."

"Why don't they have us arrested for stealin' them horses?"

"And let everybody know that Steen and Ellis was down at the Flyin' M? Not a chance of that. No, pardner, we'll stay hived up a while."

Farraday found that Sad and Swede slept at the hotel, but the proprietor was unable to say whether they were in their room or not. It seemed that no one else in town knew they had come back last night.

While the inquest was being held Sad and Swede went out, ate a breakfast, hired horses at the livery-stable and rode out of town. At the edge of town they met Dell Rios, riding alone. He looked at them curiously, nodded curtly, as they passed.

"There's somethin' about that jigger I like," said Sad. "He's gaudy and good-lookin', and he may be as crooked as a dog's hind leg, but there's somethin' decent about him. Swede, I ain't a very smart gambler, but I'd almost bet a new hat that Rios was the man who shot Dan Reynolds in San Francisco."

"Where'd yuh git that notion, Sad?"

"Hunch, coupled with the fact that Rios was in San Francisco at the time of the shootin'. Jist why he should shoot Reynolds is more than I've been able to figure out."

"It's a cinch that his foreman Ellis is in with Reynolds."

"That's plenty true, or Ellis wouldn't have been there last night with Steen. Mebbe I'll find out how close I am to the bull's-eye, if they'll let me live long enough."

"Where are we goin' now?"

"Out to the Bar 44. I may be wrong, but I've got an idea that Hewie Moore is intelligent enough to listen to reason. By this time he's heard all about that telegram, and it may be that he's gunnin' for both of us. Anyway, I'm going to make a showdown—if he'll listen to reason."

THEY found Uncle Hewie at home, and he came out on the porch, as they rode up. But it was not the grinning old man they had known. He looked them over with blazing eyes and wanted to know what in hell they were doing on the Bar 44.

"We came out to have a talk with yuh, Moore," said Sad.

"Well, yuh don't! Not by a damn sight—yuh don't! I know all about both of yuh, and you better git off this ranch while you've both got whole hides. Sneakin' in here, spyin' for Dan Reynolds! You git out of here and off this end of the valley, before we ornament a tree with yore dirty hides."

"You won't listen to my story, eh?" queried Sad. "Moore, I thought you had more intelligence than the rest."

Moore stepped back just inside his doorway.

"I'm jist givin' yuh time to git out of range," he said coldly. "I'm one of the best rifle shots in this danged state, I'd have yuh know."

They turned and rode away, while the old man leaned against the side of the doorway, gripping a Winchester thirty-thirty, while Aunt Ida begged him to put down that gun and quit spitting on his vest.

"They knowed I'd massacree 'em," he told her.

"You wouldn't kill a fool-hen for breakfast, Hewie. Put down that gun and act human. All they wanted to do was to talk sense with you. If they knew you as well as I do, they'd never rode out here to try and talk sense with you."

"I'd talk sense to them with soft-nose bullets," he growled.

"Presumably. But is that a Christian way to act?"

"Christianity ain't got a thing to do with the trouble between sheep and cattlemen. There's open season on sheep and sheepherders in this range, Idy. What do sheepmen know about Christianity?"

"The Bible speaks of sheep and shepherds," she said meekly. "The lamb is the symbol of meekness, Hewie. Doesn't it often mention the shepherds that watched their flocks by night?"

"Them wasn't sheepherders—they was nightwatchmen. What was they watchin' 'em for at night?"

"Well," sighed Aunt Ida, "I'm sure I don't know, unless it was to keep the cowpunchers from stealin' 'em."

"Yea-a-a-ah! Well, don't preach to me, Idy. The next thing I know, you'll be askin' me to fold up m' tent and pull out, leavin' Sinkin' River to the sheepherders."

"No, I'd never ask that Hewie; but when two men come in all meekness, merely askin' to talk sense with you ——"

"Meekness? Do you think Dan Reynolds ever hired a meek man? They can pack their talk to somebody else, and if they ever show up here—I'll *meek* both of 'em."

"And have their blood on your hands, Hewie?"

"No, ma'am! I'll drill 'em so far away that I won't even have blood on my land."

"Well, put away the gun, Hewie. No use standin' there, like a picture of Daniel Boone. You made your bluff."

"Bluff! If they hadn't pulled their freight, they'd 'a' been more than a bluff, y'betcha."

Uncle Hewie sighed over the fact that he had not been obliged to kill somebody, and put the gun in the corner. A sudden idea caused him to work the lever of the gun, disclosing the fact that there were no cartridges in it. He turned and looked at the complacent Aunt Ida.

"Idy," he said wailingly, "you took them shells out?"

"They're on the shelf over there, Hewie."

"Idy, you'll be the death of me some day."

"Mebbe, Hewie; but it won't be any hanging for murder."

JOHNNY CALDWELL, freckled face, Two Bar JP puncher, sat in the shadow of a huge granite outcropping on the Rim, his chin in his hands, his blue eyes gazing thoughtfully down over the rolling hills later that same afternoon. Johnny was very much in love with his boss, Jean Proctor, and that fact had caused him to day-dream very much lately. Farther back on the Rim, his roan horse, reins down, cropped at the tender grass of the high lands.

Johnny wanted to go back and work on the ranch, but he didn't know just how to persuade Bill Steen to take him off the Rim. If he had known it, Bill Steen would have been glad to take him off that job. In fact, Johnny Caldwell was one man Bill Steen wanted off the Rim. But Jean Proctor realized that she could trust Johnny, and she would have blocked any movement of Steen's to take Johnny off that job.

Johnny sighed deeply, scratched his freckled nose. Suddenly a soft noise caused him to freeze statue-like. Slowly he turned his head. Just behind him. leaning across the rock, were Sad Sontag and Swede Harrigan. Johnny bit a corner of his lower lip and stared back at the valley, as though he had never seen them.

Johnny had all the latest news concerning those two; and he had let them sneak up on him. What a fine guardian he had made! No use of him trying to draw a gun. He had been a dreaming fool to allow two of Reynolds' men to capture him.

"Hello, Johnny," said Sad. Johnny slowly turned his head.

"Fingers itchin'?" queried Sad, grinning softly.

Johnny turned all the way around, careful to keep his hand away from his gun.

"I'm pretty good, don'tcha think?" he asked bitterly.

"Well, it's all accordin' to who yuh ask," replied Sad. "If I was you, I'd keep more awake, Johnny. The first thing yuh know some of Reynolds' outfit will sneak up and get yuh cold."

"Meanin' yourself?" asked Johnny coldly.

Sad laughed at him and Johnny's blue eyes snapped angrily. "Don't try to prove any alibi with me," he said.

"I'm not," said Sad quickly. "Git his gun, Swede."

Johnny shut his lips tightly, but let Swede remove the six-shooter. Sad took the gun and looked it over carefully, while Johny eyed him wonderingly.

"Oh, it's a good gun," he said.

"Yuh don't do much target practice up here, do yuh, Johnny?"

"Naturally not."

"Yuh ain't supposed to shoot at all, eh?"

"Not unless yuh have to."

"I wondered about that."

Sad slipped the cartridges from the gun and weighed them in his hand. They were the same caliber as Sad's, and he compared the weight with six from his own belt. He finally reloaded them in Johnny's gun, pointed the gun downward and snapped the hammer six times.

There was no more report than if the cartridges had been empty shells. Johnny's eyes opened wide, as Sad removed the cartridges again and showed him the dented primers.

"What in hell is the matter with them shells?" wondered Johnny.

"Dummy loads," said Sad. "Not even live primers. Johnny, it's a good thing yuh never *had* to shoot at somebody."

Johnny's expression of wonder changed to one of bitterness.

"That's jist like murderin' a man—changin' the shells in his gun for dummies!" he said. "Ain't there nothin' you damn sheepmen won't do to a cowpuncher?"

Sad took six cartridges from his own belt, reloaded Johnny's gun and handed it back to him. Johnny took it, a queer expression in his eyes. Here he was with a loaded gun in his hand, and neither of these two men had drawn a gun. Was there a trick to it, he wondered? He licked his dry lips for a moment, took a deep breath and shoved the gun in his holster.

"That's good enough for a starter," said Sad easily, reading Johnny's thoughts. "Here's the old shells."

He handed the six dummy shells to Johnny. "It's no trick, Johnny—and

we're not connected in any way with Reynolds."

SWEDE began rolling a cigarette, and tossed the tobacco and papers to Johnny, who started the manufacture of a smoke. His fingers shook a little.

"I'll admit I'm pretty dumb," he said. "What in hell is it all about?"

Sad rolled a smoke and sat down against the rock, hunching into a comfortable position.

"Johnny Caldwell, what would yuh say if I told yuh that Bill Steen was a Reynolds man?"

"I'd say you was crazy, Sontag."

"Exactly—and no blame to you. Do you know Reynolds owns the Flyin' M outfit?"

"Hell, I never heard of such a thing. Reynolds is a sheep man."

"And suppose somebody told yuh that Jeff Ellis was also a Reynolds man."

"Well," drawled Johnny, "it would make me laugh."

"And that Reynolds put Buck Welty, Dell Rios' lookout, on the Rim."

Johnny scowled thoughtfully for a full minute.

"Why, damn it, Sontag, that would make Dell Rios a Reynolds man."

"Yeah, it would. What of it?"

"It ain't reasonable. Rios owns a big outfit, and if the sheep got in here—Sontag, where didja git all them queer ideas?"

"Where did you git them dummy shells in yore gun?"

Johnny opened and closed his mouth, reached in his pocket and took out one of the dummy shells.

"They didn't even snap, did they?" he muttered. "Now, how in hell——"

"They took blank primers and then reloaded the shells with only the bullets," said Sad. "You'll have to check up on the other lookouts, Slim and Tony."

"I shore will—and Welty."

"Leave Welty out of the thing. His gun is *loaded*."

"You mean to say that he shifted cartridges on us?"

"Somebody did—who else could? Yo're pretty sure of Slim and Tony."

Johnny grinned sourly. "I'm not even sure of myself now, Sontag. You've got me fightin' my hat, I tell yuh. Where'd yuh git the idea that Steen is a Reynolds man—Steen and Ellis. Hell, you must have a—well, it ain't reasonable. Why, Steen has been foreman"—Johnny stopped and shook his head slowly. "I can't believe anythin' like that."

"Johnny, you told me that you had a big charge of dynamite, wired to shoot any old time up here on the Rim. And that you had a bon-fire all laid, with a five-gallon can of kerosene, ready to touch her off for signals."

Johnny nodded quickly. "Got one of them battery boxes."

"Check up on the wirin'," advised Sontag. "And yuh might find out if it ain't water in the kerosene can."

Johnny got to his feet quickly. "What do you know about it? Did you——"

"Would I tell yuh, if I did? Don't be a fool, Caldwell. I don't know how near right I am, but if I was you I'd find out about things."

Johnny blinked rapidly and turned to look down over the valley.

"I dunno, Sontag," he said slowly. "If you're playin' some kind of a game with me, I don't sabe it. You sound honest, and yuh act honest, but I dunno. What about that telegram from Reynolds? They said yuh didn't deny anythin'. Is Reynolds payin' you two fellers?"

"No. That telegram was a scheme to drive us out. Reynolds don't want us here. Caldwell, yo're damn close to bein' sheeped out."

"Do yuh mean that, Sontag?" eyeing Sad keenly.

"Why did somebody put dummy shells in yore gun? Think hard, Johnny. The boys all know when yo're goin' down to the ranch. They know it the night before. You all take off yore guns in the evenin', don'tcha?"

"Sure."

"All right. Yo're not allowed to shoot up here on the Rim, unless there is a mighty good cause for yuh to shoot. If you had fired a shot down in the valley, yore gun would have worked right, 'cause the good shells were put back, before yuh left the Rim."

Johnny frowned thoughtfully, finally nodded slowly.

"It could have been done, Sontag. But how do you know it was?"

"Because yo're buckin' against brains. Reynolds will put sheep over this Rim, if such a thing is possible. At least,

he would, until I told yuh what I have. Look out all the time. See about that wirin' for the dynamite, and examine the kerosene."

"Yo're damn right. But what are you fellers goin' to do?"

SAD smiled slowly. "Git out or git shot, I reckon. We tried to talk sense to Hewie Moore, and he threatened to shoot us both. I can't go and talk to Jean Proctor. She wouldn't believe me on a stack of Bibles, and Steen would shoot me on sight. Jim Farraday made a mistake and thought we were workin' for Reynolds; so he hired us for the Flyin' M. Last night we escaped on horses belongin' to Steen and Ellis, and got back to town. Yuh see, Steen and Ellis came down to tell Farraday who we are. Didja know Lee Welch?"

"Yeah, I know Welch."

"Know a feller named Doc Bladen?"

"No, I never heard of him."

"Bladen killed Welch last night in the Flyin' M ranch-house."

"The hell he did! Self-defense, I suppose."

"That's what Farraday told us."

"Well, I'll be darned. Sontag, why don'tcha have a talk with Jean Proctor? Let me go down and tell her. She'll believe me. If it comes to a showdown, I'll kill Bill Steen. Bill has always been a friend of mine, and I thought he was square as a dollar; but if he's workin' a double-cross on Jean Proctor, I'll be proud to remove him complete."

"No," smiled Sad, "I don't want anybody else to prove up on Bill."

"You choose him yourself, eh?"

"I'd like to. Yuh see, Johnny, I hate a liar."

"Shore—same here. But what about Dell Rios?"

"The only evidence against Rios is the fact that he hired Welty to ride the Rim, and that his foreman is a Reynolds man. He might be all right. He may think Welty is all right, and he may not know that Jeff Ellis is a Reynolds man. We better lay off Rios until we git a little more evidence."

"That's right. You say Uncle Hewie wouldn't talk to yuh?"

"Only with a Winchester rifle."

"Uh-huh. Well, the old man thinks a lot of me, and—do yuh want to stay at the Bar 44?"

"Well, it's about the only place we might stay."

"You stick here on the Rim until I git back. Welty won't be back on this side until supper time, and it's doubtful if Slim or Tony, the other riders up here, will come along here. I'm goin' down and hammer some sense into the old man. Between me and Aunt Ida, I'll betcha he'll welcome yuh like a long lost brother. *Hasta luego.*"

CHAPTER X

LOADED BULLETS

BUT Johnny, in leaving Sad and Swede on the Rim, did not reckon with the fact that Slim Reed, the other Two Bar JP rider on the Rim, owned a pair of twelve-power binoculars, and that shortly after Johnny had ridden away, Slim perched himself out on a point of the Rim and proceeded to investigate everything in sight.

Slim Reed was six feet three, very thin, hatchet-faced, with buck-teeth, and no sense of humor. Resting the high-powered glasses on a rock, he swept the edge of the Rim, picked up Sad and Swede a half-mile away, but so plainly that he could almost count the buttons on their shirts.

They were humped against the rock, almost on the edge of the Rim, apparently watching down the valley. Slim cased the glasses, sneaked back to his horse, and proceeded to do an Indian sneak on the two men. Slim had the latest news of them from Johnny, and there was no question in his mind that they were there for no good purpose.

So Slim played the same game on them that they had played on Johnny Caldwell, except that Slim sneaked in, threw down on them with his rifle, and collected their guns. Slim did not ask any questions. He did mention the fact that they were awful fools to ever come up on the Rim.

Sad was not inclined to waste words on Slim, because Slim was not open to any sort of conviction. Slim forced them to mount their horses and precede him at a slow pace to their cabin, where he forced Swede to rope Sad, and afterward Slim roped Swede, much to Swede's disgust.

"Where's Welty?" asked Sad.

"Went down to the Circle R today," growled Slim. "Be back before sundown. Whatcha want him for?"

"I jist wondered where he went."

"The hell yuh did? I suppose yuh wonder where Caldwell is, eh?"

"I know where he is."

"Yeah-a-ah? Where is he, Wise Man?"

"Oh, I sent him down to the Bar 44," replied Sontag.

"*You* sent him down there?" Slim gasped.

"Well, I didn't exactly send him, Slim, he wanted to go."

"Wait a minute, feller; yo're talkin' too fast for me. Do yuh mean to say that Johnny Caldwell knows yo're up here on the Rim?"

"Sure."

"Of all the liars I ever knowed, yo're the worst, Sontag," replied Slim coldly. "Johnny will be here by sundown, and he'll shore be surprised to hear yuh say that again."

Sad grinned at him, brows lifted thoughtfully.

"How long since yuh fired that six-gun of yours, Slim?"

"I dunno. Mebby a month."

"I'll betcha four-bits it won't go off."

"You'll bet me four-bits that my six-gun won't shoot?"

"Yeah."

Slim drew the gun from his holster, looked it over carefully, and glanced keenly at Sad.

"No yuh don't, feller. Suppose I fire a shot. Mebbe she's a signal, eh? Nope, I don't bite on things like that."

"Got a pair of horse-shoein' nippers around here?"

"Yeah."

"Snip the bullet out of one of yore shells. Take one out of yore gun and make the test."

Slim found the nippers and took a cartridge from his gun. It was evident that he still feared a plot of some kind. He quickly inserted a cartridge in its place, and placed the gun beside him on the table.

It was not difficult to snip through the cartridge just behind the bullet, and Slim's eyes bugged with wonder, when he discovered that the cartridge contained no powder.

"Well, damn you!" he snorted at Sad. "How did yuh do that?"

"How could I do it?" smiled Sad. "I never had yore gun."

Slim's face twisted in painful concentration, as he removed the other five cartridges and clipped off the bullets. He tested a couple from his belt, and found them loaded. Then he loaded the gun again and shoved it into his holster.

"Yuh better hide them opened shells," advised Sad. "Yuh don't want anybody to know yuh found 'em."

Slim gathered them up carefully and looked curiously at Sad.

"If yuh knew they wasn't loaded, why didn't yuh throw down on me?"

"I wasn't sure about them rifle ca'tridges," smiled Sad.

Slim quickly pumped out the cartridges from the thirty-thirty and cut off the bullets.

"Sand enough to make 'em shake naturally!" he snorted. "Listen, feller, yo're goin' to tell me how that was done and how you knowed all about it."

"Guessed it," smiled Sad.

"Guessed, hell! Takes more'n guessin' to do a thing like that. Now, come through with the truth. I'm not goin' to——"

"Sh-h-h-h!" hissed Sad, as they heard a horse walking outside. "Don't mention it, Slim."

IT WAS Buck Welty, half-drunk, coming back from the Circle R, where he had been to get clean clothes. Slim stepped to the doorway.

"Johnny in yet?" asked Welty.

"No."

"Good. Let's me and you have a drink, eh? Good stuff. Whoa, you damn buzzard-bait. Say! I heard that Sontag and Harrigan are back in this end of the county, and they're bein' looked for. I comes back past the Two Bar JP, and Bill Steen says they're to be cracked down on at sight."

"You hadn't ort to have brought that liquor, Buck," said Slim.

"Aw, what the hell! Little liquor does yuh good. All I brought was a quart."

"C'mon in," grunted Slim, He loved liquor, but had curbed his thirst on the Rim. Welty came in, carrying a sack, which contained clothes, but stopped short at sight of Sad and Swede. He blinked wonderingly, looked at Slim, who grinned in appreciation.

"Well, didja ever see such hair on

a dog!" explode Welty. "Where in hell didja git 'em, Slim?"

"Found 'em settin' on the Rim a while ago."

"On the Rim? Well, of all the nerve! Slim, that's worth a drink."

Welty uncorked the bottle and they both took a drink.

"How about the boys?" asked Slim.

"Not out of my bottle. Nossir, not out of my bottle. Hold yore glass."

They had another drink. The situation was so pleasant that they soon had another.

"Johnny will come back and raise hell," warned Slim, trying to refuse another drink.

"That bat-eared ranny better lay off'n me, Slim. I'm sick of him tryin' to make morals for me. From now on, he better lay off'n me. Have 'nother drink, Slim."

"Mi's well. Here's how."

"I'll tell yuh what le's do," suggested Welty. "You lemme have these two sheep waddies, and I'll take 'em down to Circle R. I'll git Steen to come down and we'll hol' court on 'em."

"Yo're crazy's hell," gulped Slim. "My pris'ners, yuh unnerstand, and I'm goin' to take 'em to the Two Bar JP."

"Yo're foolish. That girl gits shoft-hearted and turn 'm loosh."

"Tha's what I'm goin' do jussasame. My prisoners."

"I'll match yuh for 'm."

"You go lay a aig."

"You try make me lay a aig," Buck came back belligerently. "I'll take 'm down and turn 'em over to the boys. Finish everythin' quick."

SLIM braced one hand against the rough table, as he poured a stiff drink down his throat.

"Lemme tell yuh shomethin'," he said thickly, but seriously. "Them two fellers b'long t' me. You ain't got no int'res' in 'm. Keep yore hands off 'm, Buck."

"Yo're drunk and crazy," retorted Buck. "You stay in the Rim, where yuh b'long, and I'll dishpose of 'em. I'm tellin' yuh thish, 'cause that's what I'm goin' t' do, feller."

"Thasso?" Slim stiffened quickly and his hand jerked back to his gun. "You jist try it, Welty."

"You lookin' f'r trouble?" queried Buck. "All right—you've got it!"

Both men jerked out their guns. It seemed to Sad and Swede that Welty was slow on the draw, even for a drunken man. Perhaps he did not feel the need of haste. At any rate his gun was only half out of the holster, when Slim fired.

The big revolver thundered in that small shack, and Welty, a queer expression on his face, jerked backward from the shock of the bullet, stumbled on his high-heels and crashed down against the wall, while a crimson stain appeared on his right breast. Slim clung to the table with one hand, staring white-faced at Buck. He shifted his eyes to Sad.

"By God, I got him!" he said soberly.

"Yeah, yuh got him all right, Slim," replied Sad.

"But—but he ain't dead."

"No, he ain't dead—yet. But if yuh don't git a doctor for him pretty quick, he will be dead."

Slim forgot his prisoners, forgot everything, except the need of a doctor. He stumbled outside, climbed on Buck's horse, and went galloping down through the scrubby timber, heading for Sinking River.

"Drunken fools," observed Sad. Slim had not roped their legs, and now Sad crossed the room to where an ax leaned against a bunk. Turning around he got the handle between his hands, worked it up until his fingers grasped the blade. Then he and Swede backed against each other, and Sad sawed Swede's bonds. Within five minutes after Slim galloped away, Sad and Swede were free, and with their guns again in their holsters.

Sad made a quick examination of Welty, and they placed him on a bunk.

"Nothin' we can do for him," said Sad. "Nothin' a doctor can do for him, by the time a doctor can git here. I reckon our best move is to get off this Rim before some more of that knot-headed bunch move in on us."

"Suits me fine," grinned Swede. "Where do we go?"

"I'm bettin' on Johnny Caldwell; so we might as well head for the Bar 44."

They took their horses from the old lean-to stable and rode back down the valley. Sad was smiling as they left the Rim.

"What's so funny about it?" queried Swede.

"I was jist thinkin' what a laugh the Devil must have got out of that gun-fight."

"Laughin' at who, Sad?"

"Buck Welty. Yuh see, Buck didn't expect Slim's gun to go off."

THOUGH Sad and Swede didn't know it, Johnny Caldwell was out of luck. Aunt Ida met him at the ranch-house of the Bar 44, and told him that Uncle Hewie had gone to town.

"And I'm worried about him, Johnny," she said, and told how Uncle Hewie had driven Sad and Swede off the ranch.

"Now, he's gone to town, where he'll meet Judge Pennington. Hewie is all swelled up over his own foolish actions, and he'll get drunk as sure as fate. I tried to persuade him to stay home, but he would go. If you see him in town, I do hope you can send him home, Johnny."

"Yes'm," rather dubiously. "Yuh see, I ain't got no right in town, Aunt Ida. I'm supposed to be guardin' the Rim, but I shore wanted to have a talk with Uncle Hewie about them same men he ran away from here today. They're up there on the Rim, waitin' for me to come back."

"Up on the Rim, Johnny?"

"Yes'm; sounds funny, don't it. I—yuh see, I wanted to see if Uncle Hewie wouldn't let 'em stay here."

"Why, Johnny, they couldn't stay here—not after what folks say."

"No, ma'am, I reckon not—if yuh believe what folks say."

"Don't you?"

Johnny cuffed his sombrero down over one eye.

"No, ma'am, I don't."

"Well, goodness me! You ain't able to disprove it, are yuh, Johnny?"

"Only in my own mind."

"I'm afraid that won't be sufficient for Hewie."

"No, I reckon he'd have to have an angel come right out and tell him, before he'd believe it."

"Worse than that. Hewie don't believe in angels—not even if they had a flamin' sword."

"Well," said Johnny firmly, "I'm goin to Sinkin' River, Aunt Ida. It's all my job is worth—but I'm goin'."

"They can't hang yuh for doin' what yuh think is right, Johnny."

"I ain't never been hung yet," grinned Johnny.

JOHNNY CALDWELL was in no hurry to reach Sinking River. He was afraid he might meet someone from the Two Bar JP who might demand an explanation of his presence in town. It was nearly suppertime, when he tied his horse behind a general store, and went in through the back door.

There were Farraday and Doc Bladen at a counter, purchasing some goods. Johnny knew Farraday, but it was the first time he had ever seen Bladen. They paid no attention to Johnny, who started toward the front of the store. Suddenly his heart gave a jerk. Here were Jean Proctor and Bill Steen coming through the front door.

Johnny ducked quickly between the ends of two counters, and got in behind a pile of blankets, which were stacked on the counter. He heard Farraday talking with Jean, and he heard Farraday introduce her to Bladen. They were talking and laughing for several minutes, while Johnny shivered for fear the storekeeper would find him there.

Finally he heard Jean telling Steen that she would be there for fifteen or twenty minutes, and he peered out to see Steen, Farraday and Bladen leave the store and go across the street. Johnny shifted his feet and rubbed his freckled nose against the edge of a blanket.

A slight noise behind him caused him to jerk his head around. Jean Proctor was standing between the ends of the two counters, looking at him. Johnny took a deep breath, straightened up and looked at her.

"I saw you come in here, Johnny," she said.

Johnny removed his hat and held it limply in both hands. His blue eyes held a deeply pained expression, while his mind went around and around, trying to think of something to put into words.

"Why did you come down here, when you are supposed to be on the Rim?" asked Jean. "Is that playing fair with me?"

"No, ma'am," he managed to whisper.

"And you hid from me." Jean brushed a lock of hair away from her cheek with a nervous gesture. "I thought I could trust *you*," she said.

"Listen, Jean." begged Johnny hoarsely. It was the first time he had ever called her anything but Miss Proctor. "I—I've got a reason. Yuh see, Sontag and Harrigan——"

"What about them?"

I—I left 'em up on the Rim, and I promised——"

"You left *them* on the Rim?"

"Yes'm, yuh see, Uncle Hewie run 'em off his place, and they wanted me to fix it so they could stay there; so I came back and——"

"Johnny, have you gone entirely crazy?"

"I—I—" Johnny blinked painfully. "Yeah, I s'pose I have. Yuh see, my six-gun was loaded with dummy shells, and Sontag——"

JOHNNY stopped short. Bill Steen was coming in the front door. He saw them and came over, a scowl on his face.

"What are you doin' down here, Caldwell?" he demanded.

"Johnny doesn't seem to know," said Jean wearily. "He has tried to tell me something about leaving Sontag and Harrigan on the Rim—in his place, I suppose."

Johnny shut his lips tightly. He could see his finish as an employe of the Two Bar JP. Steen's eyes widened a little.

"Left Sontag and Harrigan on the Rim, eh?" said Steen coldly. "Yuh didn't leave 'em up there *loose,* didja, Caldwell?"

"They wasn't tied to nothin', when I left, Steen."

"Who was with 'em?"

"Nobody."

Steen turned to Jean. "I reckon that lets *him* out, Jean."

Jean nodded and turned away. Johnny started to protest, but changed his mind and looked squarely at Steen.

"I'll take my time, Bill," he said. "It's about twenty dollars."

Steen gave him the money. "Tell me what Sontag and Harrigan are doin' up there on the Rim."

"You go to hell," whispered Johnny.

"Turnin' sheepherder, eh?" sneered Steen.

"You'll think so when the showdown comes, Steen."

Jean turned quickly and looked at them.

"This ain't no place to talk loud," warned Steen.

Johnny laughed recklessly. "Keep bluffin', Bill."

Steen's eyes hardened and he moved closer. Johnny's right hand was spread open just above the butt of his gun.

"There's no dummy shells in it, Bill," he said tensely.

From outside came the rattle and thud of a running horse being jerked to a quick stop, and the rider almost fell to the ground. It was Slim Reed, coming for a doctor. He yelled at someone on the street. Steen turned quickly and hurried to the doorway.

Several men crowded around Slim, who was trying to tell them to get a doctor. Steen grasped Slim by the arm, as Jean and Johnny came out, and yanked him violently.

"What happened?" Steen asked harshly.

"I shot Buck Welty," panted Slim. "Mebbe he's dead by now. Sontag said he would be dead, if I didn't get a doctor."

"Why did you shoot Buck," asked Steen.

"I—I dunno," he answered blankly. "Yeah, I do know. He wanted to take my prisoners away from me."

"Yore prisoners?"

"Sontag and Harrigan. I caught 'em on the rim, Bill, so I herded 'em to the shack and tied 'em up. Welty wanted to take 'em to the Circle R, and I wanted to take 'em to the Two Bar JP."

"And so yuh got drunk and shot it out, eh?" snarled Steen. "Yeah, I can smell whisky on yuh yet."

Steen let loose of Slim and backed away from him. Jean was at the edge of the sidewalk, wondering what it was all about, while Johnny stood in the doorway, grinning with the mirth he did not feel.

"So yuh captured 'em, didja, Slim?" he jeered.

Slim looked owl-eyed at Johnny.

"I shot Welty," he said foolishly. "I—I had loads in m' gun. Sontag proved that my shells were all dummies. Even the thirty-thirties was empty, Johnny. I cut the bullets out with the pinchers."

"What are you talking about, Slim?" asked Jean.

"He's drunk and Johnny's crazy," interrupted Bill Steen. "Here comes the

doctor. Slim, you better git him a livery-stable horse; he can't drive his horse and buggy up over the Rim."

"All right," said Slim nervously, and started for the stable.

Steen left Jean and ran across the street, where he found Farraday, Terrill, Bladen and Ellis, Dell Rios' foreman on the Circle R. Quickly he told them what had happened on the Rim.

"That's our chance!" exploded Farraday. "But we've got to git there ahead of the sheriff and doctor."

They ran outside to their horses, and Bill Steen hurried over to tell Jean where they were going.

"You bring Sontag and Harrigan back here," said Jean. "They are not guilty of anything—yet."

"We'll bring 'em back," replied Steen. "Where's Caldwell?"

"He ran back through the store, when you went across the street."

Muttering a curse under his breath, Steen whirled and ran back to the hitch-rack, where he mounted his horse. As they swept out of town, he rode in close to Farraday.

"Caldwell's ahead of us," he said savagely. "Somethin' has slipped, Jim; and we've got to stop Caldwell, too. By God, we'll wipe out all three of 'em, and then we'll have a clean slate."

Chapter XI

SHOOTING!

JUDGE PENNINGTON, Hewie Moore's drinking partner, had never been a judge. In fact, he had never practiced law. But he had the huge frame, equatorial rotundity, heavy jowls, red nose, beetling brows and deep bass voice usually associated with those high in the graces of the judicial gods. He affected winged collars cut back nearly to his ears, where the gray, curling hair jutted out like horns, rusty-black, cutaway coat, worn as far back as anyone could remember him, and elastic-topped shoes, known as Congress gaiters.

A truly odd couple, he and Hewie Moore, as they stood at the bar of the Sinking River Saloon that afternoon. Hewie's high-pitched voice and the rumbling bass of the Judge. For a number of years they had done their drinking together. It seemed that the Judge waited for Hewie's thirst to get the better of him; knowing that it would happen eventually, as it had today.

"By the gods, sir," rumbled the Judge, "I am proud of you, Hewie."

"Kinda proud of m'self," piped Hewie. "And, Judge, yuh should have seen 'em skedaddle. How them two sheepherders did fade out. Bartender, we would have service."

"Again I repeat, I am proud of you, sir," intoned the Judge.

"I jist reached for that old thirty-thirty, pumped in a shell"—Hewie paused thoughtfully. "No, I didn't—I already had a shell in her. That was it. Will yuh slide that bottle a little, Judge?"

"With a great deal of pleasure. That is great liquor, sir. How well do I remember an occasion, in which I was the guest of General Grant. Let me see-e-e. It was just before or after the—hm-m-m-m."

"Flood?" suggested Hewie seriously. "Flood?"

"Excuse me, Judge; I was thinkin' of Noah," replied Hewie.

"I thought you fought with Lee," said the bartender.

"I did fight with Lee, sir. I killed Yankees until m' arm give out."

"I heard about that," said Hewie. "Wasn't it Gineral Grant that said—'Buy Pennin'ton off and git him on our side, before he wrecks the whole damn army of ours'?"

"I did gain a certain fame," admitted the Judge.

"Yuh shore did, Judge. That's how the Battle of Bull Run got its name."

"How was that?" queried the bartender.

"Why, they heard the Judge bellerin' for a drink before breakfast. Shove that bottle a little, will yuh, please; I'm drinkin' with yuh."

"Does your wife know you are here today?" asked the Judge.

Hewie paused in the act of pouring himself a drink.

"You do think of the most damn unpleasant things, Judge," he said. "No, she don't *know* I'm here, but she's makin' a good guess. And I'll have to set up half the night, listenin' to scripture. The last time me and you got drunk together, she kept me awake all night, readin' Revelations. Right then I said to her—'Idy, you lemme alone after this. If I'm goin' to have snakes, let

me have 'em in modified style.' Tonight me and her will prob'ly go over the dimensions of the ark. Shove that bottle this way, will yuh? If I've got to go into the shipbuildin' business, I shore want to be all set to lay an even keel."

"By gad, sir, that is one of the reasons I have always been contented with single cussedness," rumbled the Judge.

"And the other reason is—yo're too damn ornery to live with any woman. What's the idea of allus gittin' yore arm around that bottle? Do yuh think yo're the only dry person around here?"

"Be moderate," begged the Judge. "We have the evening before us, Hewie. Tell me again of how you ran the sheepherders off your domain."

Hewie did. Then he went out for a little walk and a breath of air. When he came back he was too excited and full of news to talk clearly.

"Lis'n, Hewie," begged Judge. "Talk slower, will you? The older you get the more increas'nly hard it is to unnerstand you in moments of stress."

"Yo're drunk," declared Hewie. "Yessir, yo're drunk, Judge. Firs' time I ever drank you unner a table. Well, as far as I can understand from thish babel of tongues, as the Bible would shay, Slim Reed shot Buck Welty in the cabin."

"And 'f I may be so bold as to ask, Hewie; what part of Buck's anatomy is his cabin?"

"He—he shot him on the Rim, you danged old fool."

"Oh, I shee. In other words, he merely peeled him, so to speak."

"Yuh can't peel no man," explained Hewie owlishly.

"Hewie," said the Judge loftily, "I am a man of fine persheptions, ver' brainy—oh, ver' brainy, you unnerstand. I know what you're talking about, but I'll be damned if I know what you mean."

"Bill Steen, Farraday, Terrill, Bladen and Ellis jist pulled out," said the bartender. "Slim said he had Sontag and Harrigan tied up in their cabin on the Rim, and I'll bet them five jiggers are goin' up there to git 'em."

HEWIE was not too drunk to realize what the bartender had said.

"Tha's real pity," he said solemnly. "I heartily 'prove of such a proceedings, but I think thish is shomethin' worth conshidering. I am a hard man—oh, ver' hard. I've had to be hard. But I don't think any man should be forshibly removed from thish mundane spear, sphere without a fair and impartial trial. Judge Pennin'ton, I shuggest that me and you mount our horshes and attend thish party."

"I have no horsh, Hewie; but no doubt a suitable mount may be shecured at the stable. It will be a pleasure, my ol' friend. Never may any man shay that Judge Pennington failed a friend in a pinch. We will take a bit of hard liquor along?"

"Neither one of you old pelicans are fit to ride a horse," said the bartender. "My advice is for yuh to stay here."

"Lis'n, feller," said Hewie thickly, "If anybody asks yuh if we took yore advice, yuh can pos'tively state that we didn't. C'mon, Judge."

TONY RUSH, the Bar 44 cowboy who Hewie kept on the Rim, was not especially bright nor exceptionally brave. In fact, Tony was, in range parlance, a bit spooky. He would probably not hesitate to shoot a man, but horses could never drag him back to view the remains. Tony could never vouch for the old adage that dead men tell no tales, because Tony never got close enough to a dead man to find out what they might tell.

And on this day Tony came back to the cabin on the Rim. It was usual that the first one back to the cabin built a fire in the stove, in order to hasten the preparation of the evening meal. Tony kicked open the door, noted that he was the first one back, and decided to build a fire, before stabling his horse.

He gathered up some kindling, shoved it into the old stove, poked in part of an old newspaper and touched a match. Then he sighed, straightened up, looked around and saw Buck Welty. Tony sniffed. There was a slight odor of liquor. But Tony's eyes saw the gobby stain on the breast of Buck Welty, and he froze like a pointer dog with a covey of quail under his nose.

Buck was not breathing, his sightless eyes were staring at the ceiling. Buck was dead!

Tony drew a whistling breath, and as though galvanized by an electric shock, whirled and went out of that cabin in two jumps. His horse whirled at Tony's

sudden approach, but Tony was in the saddle in a long leap, and he whaled that horse down along the Rim, beating it over the rump with his hat, riding like a maniac.

Fifteen minutes later Johnny Caldwell rode in over the Rim. He saw the smoke issuing from the stove-pipe of the cabin; so he went carefully.

Johnny had fully made up his mind to throw his lot with Sad and Swede. He realized that Steen and his gang were not far behind him; so he made a swift entrance into the cabin, gun in hand, only to find a fire nearly burned out in the stove, Buck Welty dead, and no sign of Sad and Swede.

Johnny did not loiter in getting away from there, which was lucky for Johnny, because the five men following him had made up their minds that it was open season on Johnny Caldwell, as well as on Sad and Swede. They, in turn, made a sneak on the little cabin, and found just what Tony and Johnny had found; so, rather than incur the displeasure of the sheriff and coroner, they rode north, intending to wait and see what happened.

If Sontag and Harrigan were still on the Rim, they were willing to make a try at capturing them. They thought Caldwell had released the prisoners.

"Damned if I wouldn't like to find out how Slim discovered them dummy shells," growled Ellis. "I'll betcha Buck Welty thought he was goin' up against a cinch game for him when he drew on Slim."

"Sontag told Slim!" snapped Steen. "Didn't I hear Slim tell Caldwell?"

"I know that, but how did Sontag know it?"

"We'll ask Sontag," laughed Bladen. "It was your idea, wasn't it, Ellis?"

"Well, it worked until that damn Sontag showed up," replied the foreman of the Circle R. "If I ever git my hands on that whippoorwill, he'll tell me how he knew."

"If yuh ever do," said Terrill. "The whole damn trouble is the fact that Sontag starts thinkin' where the rest of us leave off. I wish Reynolds would git back here. We need brains on this job."

"The whole thing seems rediculous," declared Bladen. "Welty had the rest of these rim-riders at his mercy, and all there was to do was to shove the sheep across the Rim."

"That's all," growled Steen. "But when everythin' was set—Reynolds got shot. His sheep foreman wouldn't move a damn sheep without orders from Reynolds; so there yuh are. Now Welty is dead, Caldwell off the job, suspicious as the devil, and Slim Reed ready to tell the world that dummy shells had been planted in his six-gun and rifle. We're up against a tough deal right now."

THE fire Tony had built had died out in the stove by the time Sheriff Stormy See, Tiny Parker, Doctor Neeley, the coroner, and Slim Reed reached the cabin. Their examination was brief. Slim swore that the body was not on the bed when he left there, and that Sontag and Harrigan were there. Stormy was disgusted with Slim's continuous gabble of things, and he proceeded to put Slim under arrest, until a coroner's jury could decide what actually had happened.

"I tell yuh Buck was a-reachin' for his gun," protested Slim. "Why I could prove it by Sontag and Harrigan."

"Find Sontag and Harrigan," grunted Stormy. "You had 'em tied up, didn't yuh? Well, somebody has been here since you left, and they're either headin' out of the country, or some cowman has put 'em where they can't favor sheep no more. I'm scared yore evidence ain't worth much, Slim."

"But you can't put me in jail for shootin' Buck Welty," protested Slim indignantly.

"I s'pose I can't," agreed Stormy, "but if anybody asks where yuh are, I'll have to tell 'em yo're in jail, Slim."

The sheriff balked on taking the body back with them.

"We've only got four horses, and there's four of us. I'll be danged if I'm goin' to walk."

"He'll keep here as well as in town," said Tiny, "and we can git him tomorrow."

So they drew a blanket over Welty's body, closed the cabin and went back to town. Bill Steen and his four companions were too far back on the Rim to see the sheriff and his party leave the cabin. At any rate, they were not interested in the sheriff; what they wanted was a chance to catch Sad and Swede.

"Sad and Swede'll come back here," declared Steen. "There's no place in the

valley where they can stay; so it's a cinch they'll come here tonight. If the rest of you boys want to pull back home, it's all right; but me and Ellis are goin' to night-herd this cabin."

And so it was decided that Farraday, Bladen and Terrill would go home. Farraday was expecting a letter or a telegram from Reynolds. Steen promised that they would bring Sad and Swede to the Flying M, as soon as they had captured them—and proceeded to hole up in a brush pile about a hundred and fifty yards from the cabin, after hiding their horses.

It was a long, tiresome wait. The sun went down, and the evening crept across the hills. They were both hungry, thirsty, but determined. It grew so dark that they couldn't see the cabin.

"They won't come until later," assured Steen, when Ellis said he knew of many more comfortable places than that brush-heap.

It was about nine o'clock, and Steen was about to suggest that they go back to the Two Bar JP, have a sleep and get back early in the morning, when they saw a light in the cabin. It was sort of a pale glow through the old curtains, which hung down over the windows.

"They're back!" grunted Steen. "Now we've got 'em dead to rights."

They left their brush heap and sneaked in on the cabin. There were two saddled horses near the door, but it was too dark to identify them.

Cautiously they led the two animals away and tied them safely, where Sad and Swede could not find them in the dark. Then they came back and tried to see through the windows, but the windows, almost opaque from dirt, were also covered with burlap curtains.

Then, somebody blew out the light. Ellis and Steen stood close together at a corner of the shack, trying to plan out what to do. They had run their quarry to earth, but the digging out might be dangerous. Ellis wanted to leave them there until morning and take a chance on getting them when they came out, but Steen was afraid they might get away.

"You guard this window," said Steen. "I'll bluff 'em into quittin'."

"And prob'ly git yore damn head shot off," growled Ellis.

Steen went back to the door, threw his weight against it, shaking the little cabin, and then sprang aside quickly.

"Light the lamp and open that door," he said loudly. "We've got yuh dead to rights; so yuh might as well quit."

THERE was no sound from within the cabin. Steen repeated his declaration. He even found a stone and threw it against the door, making a loud clatter.

"Come out of there, you damn sheepherders!" he yelled. "We've got yuh cinched. C'mon out or we'll start siftin' lead through the door."

Thud! Whee-e-e-e-e! From within the shack came the sound of a shot, and the bullet which splintered through the door barely missed Bill's head.

"So that's their game, eh?" gritted Bill. "Shove a couple bullets in through the window."

Ellis replied with a shot through the window, and ducked low, swearing viciously, when a bullet from inside the cabin splintered through the window frame and burnt his left ear.

"Come out of there, you dirty sheepherders!" yelped Steen. "Come out, or we'll set fire to the cabin."

"That's the idea," said Ellis. "Let's burn the two of 'em."

Suddenly a piece of mud chinking blew out from between the logs, almost in their faces, and the bullet turned Bill's hat around on his head.

They dropped to their knees, as a high-pitched voice reached their ears.

"Who's a sheepherder, dad burn yuh?" the voice demanded. "Cain't a man lay down f'r a snooze without some damn drunken saddle slicker sneakin' around and callin' him names? You fool around here much longer, and they'll have to git Saint Peter out of bed to register a couple damn fools from Sinkin' River."

"Hewie Moore!" whispered Steen.

"Hewie, have you got that bottle, sir?" came the deep rumble of Judge Pennington's voice. "Damme, my two legs are bowed in the shape of a horse, and I still contend that we are lost. What is the shooting about?"

"I dunno; and what's more, you had that bottle last," answered Hewie. "Let's me and you go home, Judge—down to the Bar 44."

"And face your wife, sir? I am in no shape to listen to the scriptures."

"Then go to sleep."

"A very pious idea, my friend. Ah, here is that bottle!"

Came the sound of a muffled *gurgle, gurgle, gurgle.*

"Here yuh are, Hewie."

Another *gurgle, gurgle, gurgle.*

"What was the shooting, Hewie?"

"Ah-h-h-h-h! Shootin'? Oh, yea-a-a-ah! I dunno—go to sleep."

"It awoke me, sir."

"Same here. Some drunken cowpuncher, I reckon. Didn't amount to nothin'."

Chapter XII

DAN REYNOLDS

WHEN Farraday got back to Sinking River he found a telegram for him from Jim X. Smith, saying that the said Jim X. Smith would arrive late that night at the Flying M siding. Dan Reynolds usually arrived like that. He would catch a freight train, which would let him off at the ranch siding, three miles from Sinking River.

Farraday went to the ranch, and drove over from there in a buckboard. It was nearly midnight when the freight clanked in at the siding and Dan Reynolds, stepped down off the caboose. He was but a shadow of the old Dan Reynolds, still half sick, crabbed.

He merely spoke to Farraday, climbed into the buckboard, and they went to the Flying M. The road was rough, which prevented much conversation, but once in the ranch-house, with a bottle between them, Reynolds was anxious for news. Farraday had plenty of news, but it was mostly bad. Reynolds listened to what Farraday had to tell him and swore bitterly.

"Why, I've got ten thousand head ready to drive," he said. "I came over here to watch them come over the Rim—and you tell me this. Welty dead, the other Rim riders suspicious. What about this Sontag? Where in hell did he get all his knowledge? What is he and who is he, Jim?"

"You know as much as I do? Blame Steen. Didn't he get you to send Sontag a telegram?"

"He did. He said he wanted to drive Sontag and his partner out of the valley."

"And the fool never told me," said Farraday. "I bit on that telegram. I thought Sontag and Harrigan were your men; so I hired 'em, just like I told yuh. Welch was supposed to find out what Sontag knew. He said Sontag knew everything. Why Sontag even knew we wired or wrote you under the name of Jim X. Smith. Hell, I was sure he was yore man. And then Steen and Ellis, like a couple damn fools, rode down here to warn me. I suppose Sontag heard everythin' they said. Anyway, Sontag and Harrigan stole Steen's and Ellis' horses and beat it for town. Bladen had a run-in with Welch, and killed him. It was self-defense."

"Always is," growled Reynolds. "But that doesn't matter. You say one of the Rim riders killed Welty, eh?"

"Slim Reed. The fool captured Sontag and Harrigan, killed Welty and headed for town. Steen, Bladen, Terrill, Ellis and myself beat the sheriff back to the cabin, expectin' to capture Sontag and Harrigan; but they was gone. Steen and Ellis are still up there, I suppose."

"Waiting for Sontag to come back, eh? He won't. The trouble with you fellows and Sontag is the fact that he's got brains. How's the kid?"

"Gittin' along all right. Bladen is a pretty good doctor. Want to see him?"

"If he's awake, yes."

They entered another room, where a lamp was turned low. Under the tumbled blankets was Gale Reynolds, pale-faced, owl-eyed. He was the reason that there was no admittance to that part of the house. Father and son looked at each other curiously.

"How are you, Gale?" asked Dan Reynolds.

"Getting along all right, I guess," the boy replied coldly.

"That's fine."

Gale laughed weakly. "I suppose you are satisfied, Dad."

"Satisfied of what?"

"That one of your hired thugs knocked me out that night."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Dad, let's shoot square. I know it will set a precedent for you, but at least be honest with me. I came back here to square myself with Jean Proctor. Everybody, including Jean, thinks I came here to try and marry her. That's a lie, and you know it. I came here to help scheme out a way to bring

sheep in here. I used an assumed name, and I fell in love with her. No I'm not ashamed of it—the falling in love. But I was ashamed of masquerading. I stood it as long as I could, and then I—I talked too much. I was crooked; Bill Steen is crooked. She trusts Bill, and she trusted me. Go ahead and laugh. It's funny to you, Dad."

"And you almost wrecked the whole works, you fool," said his father.

"I'm sorry, Dad; but I've got a little personal pride left. But my mistake was in letting you know I was coming back here. I was honest enough to tell you I was coming to square myself. No, I'm not fool enough to think she'd ever care—again. I merely wanted her to know the truth."

"And started to tell her a lot more than your personal feelings," said Reynolds coldly.

"Which proves that you hired a man to put me out," declared the boy bitterly. "Yes, I guess I did start to tell her a few things."

DAN REYNOLDS shook his head slowly. "I don't understand you, Gale. I've got a fortune in sheep—a fortune that will come to you some day. And because of a touch of puppy love, you try to ruin me."

"And rather than lose your sheep—you had me shot."

Reynolds got up and paced the room several times, before he came back and stood beside the bed.

"Do you think I'd order my own son shot? I had a man watch for you. You were to be stopped—not hurt—and brought here. But he failed to see you get off that train. He didn't expect you to drop off the rear of the train and hide in the darkness. He didn't expect you to wait an hour, sneak in and hire a livery-horse, ride out the back way and circle the town. And when he did find you—he took a chance."

"Who was that man?"

Dan Reynolds smiled thoughtfully. "What good would his name do you?"

"I want to pay him back for that shot in the dark."

"His name is Sontag," Dan lied.

"Sontag? The cowboy who was with you the night you were shot?"

"One of the two."

"Is he still alive?"

"I suppose he is."

"He won't be by the time I get around again."

"What makes you think that, Gale?"

"Because you gave me his name. If you wasn't through with him, you'd never have told his name. But why was I kidnapped and brought here?"

"Because you might talk. Everybody in Sinking River knows who you are, and they'd love to hear what you had to say. Delirium has hung many a good man."

Gale smiled bitterly and closed his eyes.

"You go to sleep," advised his father. Is Doc Bladen taking good care of you?"

"That doesn't matter—I'll get along."

They went back to the main room and had another drink.

"I'd like to hear from Steen," said Farraday.

"Might be interesting. Dell Rios never comes down here, does he?"

"No. Who will yuh send in place of Welty?"

"Who knows? Damn that Rim! I've got ten thousand sheep ready to drive, and I'm feeding them hay. Get that, Jim—hay. I've got to drive. My range is all gone, and the market is rotten right now. Give me two years on this Sinking River range—and sheep can go to hell, as far as I'm concerned. I'm through, after that."

"It's a bad break, Reynolds. Sontag is your Jonah."

"You just think so. I'm here now—and Jonah goes overboard."

"We've still got an edge," smiled Farraday. "Both sides are gunnin' for Sontag. The cattlemen think he's yore man, and they'd lynch him in a minute, if they could catch him."

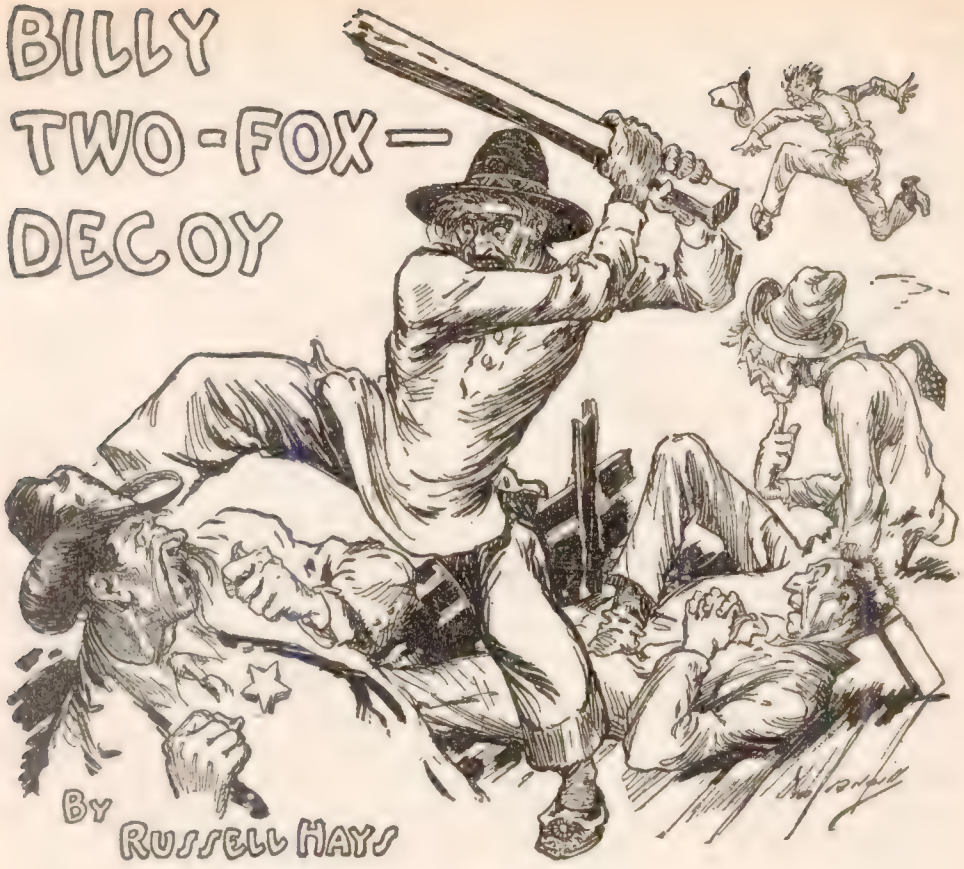
"Well, he can't last long, not with everybody against him."

"It don't seem like he could. But Steen fired Caldwell today—and Sontag has told Caldwell a lot of stuff. If Caldwell starts talkin', it might be that somebody would believe him."

"Hang some crape on your ear and go to bed," advised Reynolds.

(With Dan Reynolds himself on the ground hell breaks loose on the Sinking River Range. Don't miss the next instalment in the next WEST)

BILLY TWO-FOX— DECOY



By Russell Hays

Author of "Billy Rides a War Trail," and other Billy Two-Fox stories.

Billy makes a heap big mistake, but he fixes it, and how—with a war club!

COLEMAN'S valley lay as bleached and alkali crusted as the wind swept top of the mesa above it. Along the lonely trail twisting parallel to the dry bed of Logie creek, there padded an Indian buck, a roll of blankets on one sloping shoulder and a harassed look of insomnia in his beady, blood-shot eyes. Billy Two-Fox sought deep peace and lots of solitude.

As a means to this end, his line of march was directed toward the open door of Coleman's herder shack at the upper end of the valley. This one-room building which was used only while the Coleman flocks were held in the valley for lambing, was at this late season as deserted as a sagerat hole after the passing of a weasel. Arriving at the shack, Mr. Two-Fox threw his bundle to the floor with a relieved grunt that started from deep down in his bulging stomach.

"Ugh, plenty damn hot," he complained, wiping the sweat out of his hat band and sighting up at the shack's flimsy ridgepole. "Mebbe me die plenty quick. Sally her fault, do me this way."

Billy sat down on the floor, settled his broad back comfortably against his blankets, tilted his sombrero over his eyes and proceeded to make insulting remarks about his good wife, Sally. Sally had been so tactless as to invite her brother, Johnny-Jack, and family over for a prolonged visit. Since the latter's arrival, Mr. Two-Fox's life had been one continuous round of unrest; consisting of dog fights, Johnny-Pack's loud hee-hee, and the lamentations of a colicky papoose.

Still musing bitterly on the high-handed ways of wives and close relatives, Billy gradually lapsed into an uneasy slumber. His chin dropped and his deep breathing echoed through the narrow confines of the shack. A bottle fly settled

down to feast on the clam soup spots decorating the front of his soiled white and purple shirt. For an hour or more, peace lay heavily on Coleman's valley.

Quite without warning it was shattered by the crack of a rifle from up on the mesa. Two-Fox opened his eyes sleepily. Then as there came a fusillade of shots from the same direction, he sat suddenly upright, a look of utter dejection stamped on his massive features.

"By golly, no ketchum sleep no place," he whined plaintively. "Hope um——"

He broke off in the middle of his hopes as his ear caught the sound of a cayuse's hooves pounding up the valley. The Yakima came to his feet in a single effortless motion. Adjusting his sombrero, he slid over to the door to peer anxiously out across the baked desolation stretching away to the scattered cottonwoods along the gravelly bed of Logie creek.

A rider was swinging over into the creek trail from the crusted face of the alkali flat at the lower end of the valley. As he came closer, Billy could see that the neck of his cayuse was caked with sweat. The man, too, seemed to have had a hard time of it. One sleeve of his black shirt was torn to the shoulder and flapped scarflike behind him as he crouched forward in his stirrups; whispering in the cayuse's ear, urging its winded body into a fresh burst of speed.

The reason was apparent. Dust spurted up from the valley floor about him. Close grouped on the north rim of the valley, three horsemen jockeyed their mounts while they sent down a ragged fire. Billy saw one of them grab the reins of the other two's ponies. These two swung out of their saddles to run out on the cliff edge. One rested a carbine over a block of rock. Two reports came down into the valley as one.

The black shirted rider's cayuse stumbled, caught itself, and came on with nostrils distended. Billy could hear its rattling breath above the staccato beat of its hooves. Blood sprayed from its nose. It gave a shrill, piercing whistle, broke stride, stumbled again and fell to the ground. As it rolled, dust rose up about it in a swirling cloud through which Billy could see a blur of wildly threshing legs.

The rider, thrown clear as it fell, staggered uncertainly to his feet, looked around dazedly, then ran back to the cayuse jerking in its death throes. Dust hid his movements. Mr. Two-Fox wondered what he could be doing, then saw him yank a carbine from under a stirrup.

"Him plenty mad—make um hyiu fight," grunted Billy approvingly.

While still contemplating the slaughter, a sudden distressing thought plowed its way across his brain. Would the rider seek shelter in the herder's shack? There was no other cover in the valley worth mentioning. The Yakima's beady eyes huddled direfully together.

"Damn um!" he muttered, and whirled to stare dubiously at the sill-less square of a window at the rear of the room. This square gave promise of being several inches smaller than Billy's generous girth. As he took a tentative step toward it, a stray bullet whanged through the wall on a level with his head. Mr. Two-Fox spun on a heel to see the fugitive rider already well on his way to the shack's open door.

Lippy Evans, for that was the name of the fugitive, was doing some broken field running. Steel capped pellets rained down on either side his snake track trail. Lippy, evidently, had been shot at before. He stopped, jumped sideways, and otherwise made himself hard to hit. Six feet from the door he went into a nose dive that took him sprawling across the herder shack floor. Untangling himself, he came up facing the Indian.

LIPPY may have been surprised at finding the building occupied, but none of it showed on his lean perspiring face. "Dang near got me, didn't they?" he panted. He dodged back to peer out through a crack in the east wall, his green-gray eyes slitted like a cat's. His slender fingers felt caressingly of the dirt burn that ran from his bruised right ear to the point of his angular jaw. "Fallin' offa that nag didn't do me no good, either!"

"Who them fellows try kill you mebbe?" put in Billy perturbedly. His one track mind had just hit upon the possibility of Lippy's being a cultus man with a posse hot on his trail.

"Them guys up on the cliff?" growled Lippy, shoving out his jaw. "Take a slant at that one in the cap. Calls hisself Pasco Kid—the dirty, murderin' crook! Them other two, wished I knowed who

they was, coupla pals of his'n I reckon. I'd a had the cuffs on the Kid yet if it hadn't been for them." Lippy made further and even less complimentary remarks to himself about the ancestry of all three.

Mr. Two-Fox sidled over to the door and squinted owlishly up at the rider wearing a cap. "Cuffs" was a word Billy's good tilicum Sheriff Cadwell was wont to use. "You law man, huh?" he questioned. Somehow, Lippy didn't look like the deputies he was used to seeing.

"Special agent," said Lippy from the corner of his mouth, "workin' for the Overland company. We're wantin' the Kid for stickin' up a stage last week. I had 'im cornered over to Sody Springs this mornin' when those other two yeggs up and throwed down on me. We went round and round for a while. Bye an' bye, I give 'em the slip; but they been ridin' my trail ever since to keep me from bringin' back a posse." Lippy scowled. "Trouble is—I don't know the country!"

Billy grunted sympathetically and hurriedly removed himself from the doorway as a bullet splintered the sill. When he peeked out again, two of the outlaws had disappeared. The remaining one had entrenched himself behind a boulder, above which showed his peaked sombrero and the metallic gleam of his rifle. Billy shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to the other. He couldn't decide whether he would be better off inside or outside of the shack. To show himself now, he realized, would only be to invite a new storm of lead. Billy decided to stick around for a while.

Lippy, who had been watching him from the corner of one greenish eye, guessed the cause of his perturbation. The special officer smiled faintly, a sly, calculating smile that bordered on a leer. "We won't have no trouble gettin' away, soon as it turns dark," he said.

"Long time, night no come," mumbled Billy. He was thinking about the various things that could happen between now and then. Nor, had the gumshoe's smile been wasted upon him. Billy had an uncomfortable feeling in his tum-tum.

He gazed hard at the detective from somber, blood-shot eyes, grunted softly and resumed his former comfortable position on the floor. Sleep evaded his tired senses. Through drooping lids he covertly studied the officer. Lippy was moving half crouched along the north wall, lips fashioning toneless curses as he squinted out first one and then another of the inch wide cracks between the weathered, sun warped siding. To Mr. Two-Fox, it was plain that Lippy was also anticipating some new move on the part of his three pursuers. Billy suspected this move would be in the nature of a barrage. A fine sweat came out on his forehead as he weighed his chances in such a case.

His narrow study of the detective's skinny back became more and more hostile with each passing moment. The special agent was to blame for dragging him into this battle. Billy toyed seriously with the thought of rapping Lippy over the head and throwing him out of the shack. Fear of the law which the man represented stayed his hand. Billy had a very wholesome respect for that law.

BILLY was still sweating agitatedly along his temples when the enemy started a new attack some thirty minutes later. A bullet winged its way from a clump of boulders v-ing out into the valley from the mouth of a dry gulch to the north and west of the shack, to shatter a couple of empty fruit jars set on a shelf above the table. The special officer promptly dropped flat on his stomach close against the north wall.

"Better come over here an' get low," he snapped. "They's enough dirt banked again this wall to save us. Blame lucky—some sheep-herder was tryin' to keep out the cold air."

Billy was slow to get his meaning. When it finally penetrated he made a frantic lunge to get into a horizontal position. His head came down between his sloping shoulders as though he had been bitten on the neck by a no-see-um. A bullet had just passed his left ear with the angry buzz of a hornet. Another scraped the seat of his baggy breeches. For several minutes the air above him continued to whine and snarl with missiles. Splinters floated down from the walls and bits of glass tinkled off the shelf above the table.

"Plenty quick um shoot um house down," sniffled Billy, reaching back to explore the damage done his breeches.

"Aw—they ain't no danger, yuh keep that hard head of yourn down," said Lippy irritably.

Mr. Two-Fox pondered on this reassurance, wheezing nasally, and hitching around to untangle himself from a protruding nail head. He was thinking how fine it would be if Johnny-Jack were just here in his place when the firing ceased as abruptly as it had commenced.

A voice that struck Billy as being vaguely familiar hailed them from back of the lava boulders: "Hullo, over there —yuh givin' up? We're givin' yuh this last chance!"

Lippy squinted over at the Yakima and sneered wisely. "Guess those gents ain't figured on this north wall bein' banked. Well, live an' learn. That's how I got my start. Might as well let 'em know what they're up against."

The special agent snaked his carbine up to a knot hole and let fly at a shoulder carelessly exposed between a couple of rocks. A new fusillade of shots answered him. A quick burst, and this firing came to a desultory stop. Evidently the attackers had finally discovered that the shack was more of a fort than it gave the impression of being.

"Sure hope they feel better, curse 'em," Lippy spit out through his teeth. He rolled over on his back to gaze hungrily around the room. "Yuh don't happen to have nothin' to eat around here?"

"Me come up here ketchum plenty big sleep."

The special agent was a little puzzled, but was too much of a diplomat to voice his opinion of anyone who would choose Coleman's herder shack for a slumber party. Billy didn't feel called upon to discuss Sally's noisy relations. He reared up on an elbow to sight pensively over at the dry gulch.

Presently, he spotted a horseman riding furtively up the gulch trail. The outlaw's piebald took the steep trail nimbly as a goat. Coming out on the mesa, the rider took a branch trail that ran over to where a road repair gang was working on Satus creek. Billy couldn't quite get it into his head why the outlaw should be heading there. He started to question the gumshoe about it, then let the matter ride.

For all of Lippy's being a government man, Mr. Two-Fox could not still a secret hope that he stop a little lead. Government man or no government man, he didn't have any business taking over the herder's shack, to Billy's way of thinking. Not when Billy had got there first, and was catching up on his badly wanted sleep.

To keep from making talk with the officer, he pulled his hat down over his eyes and pretended to go to sleep. The sun swung around to shine hotly through the open west window. The floor grew harder and harder with each dragging hour. Bottle flies buzzed through the room's stagnant quiet. Lippy busied himself patching together his shirt sleeve and in keeping one cold green-gray eye on the valley walls.

The two hidden outlaws apparently had settled down to play a waiting game. The heat and stillness had a soothing effect upon the Yakima's weary nerves. While still pretending to sleep, he actually dozed off. The roar of the officer's carbine brought him upright and wide awake.

LIPPY crouched in the doorway, a whisp of smoke curling up from the muzzle of his gun. He swore in a rambling undertone as he watched the vulture he had just shot at rise heavily from the carcass of his stiffening cayuse.

"Bad luck, you kill um hum bird," muttered Billy accusingly.

"Who the hell asked for your opinion?" snarled Lippy, glowering at the redman's bleak, hawkish countenance. "Think I'm goin' to let them cursed buzzards eat my horse?"

Billy couldn't see what difference it could make; so reclined silently on the floor again. The vulture left off flapping its black wings to soar away in a slowly rising spiral. A sluggish breeze sprang up from the south heralding the approach of night. As Lippy started swearing again, Billy roused up out of a half sleep to see what was troubling him this time. Two riders stood outlined against the mesa edge to the east. One of the cayuses was a piebald, but the other was not that of either the other outlaws who had been chasing the officer.

Mr. Two-Fox made a worried clucking noise in his throat. Three cultus men was enough without another horning into the game.

Lippy seemed to think so too. "Now where the blazes did that jasper blow in from?" he gritted. "This dang country must be lousy with 'em!"

His eyes shuttled sidewise to study the Yakima uncertainly. Billy's sweat

streaked face told him nothing. The gumshoe cleared his throat, looked up at the two riders, then back at the Indian. "Yuh know I've been thinkin'—while yuh was snoozin' this afternoon," he said reflectively. "The best way for us to get outta this hole is to split up. She'll be darker'n a stack of black cats here in an hour or so. If one of us was to go out the winder and the other tears outta the door, it'll split up what shootin' there is. Just half the chance o' gettin' hit, savvy? Them birds won't be able to hit nothin' in the dark, no way."

The Indian's expression remained wooden. He wondered how the detective planned to get into Toppenish, thirty miles to the north, even if he did get clear of Coleman's valley. Billy didn't care particularly, though. He was thinking how badly Lippy was going to be mistaken about the darkness. The nights here of late had been starlit, plenty starlit for straight shooting. Also, Billy had a hyiu idea that the outlaws would be closing in with darkness.

Rolling all this over in his mind, however, he had a sudden clarifying thought. His eyes grew dull, stupid. He slowly nodded his head, grunted approvingly. "Him plenty good war trick."

"Betcha life," said Lippy heartily, too heartily.

They settled down in silence to wait for the evening shadows to change to black. The two riders up on the mesa spurred out of sight. The western sky turned to flaming bronze while a peaceful, slumberous stillness claimed the cooling flats and parched sage of Coleman's valley. Now and then, Lippy made sucking noises through his teeth that reminded Billy of Johnny-Jack eating soup. To Billy's mind's eye there came a picture of the Two-Fox family gathered around the stew kettle. He grunted sadly and tried to forget the vacuous feeling under his belt. Darkness couldn't come too soon for him.

Yet this day, it seemed to linger as though the sun had got caught on one of the high peaks of the Cascades. By the time the last afterglow had faded, a million stars were throwing a silver radiance down against the pearl gray of the sage.

Mr. Two-Fox, emboldened by the shack's cloaking shadows, got up on his knees to gaze out the room's rear and only window. Nor was his beady eye long in detecting the skulking figure that left the shelter of the boulders to come zig-zagging cautiously through the sage in the shack's direction. Shortly thereafter, another indistinct figure followed the first. Lippy at the other end of the room was also discovering that the valley floor was no longer deserted.

He muttered to himself nervously, snappishly; raised his gun, lowered it, raised it again. "Never knowed that runty sage would hide a man so good. I'd swear—yeh, that's him all right."

LIPPY was having that trouble common to moonlight hunters of deer. You see your buck, but when you go to look down your sights at him he is no longer there. The outlaw stealing up through the sage held a similar advantage. He was hard to hang sights on. "Dang 'im, I'll give him somethin' to think about anyhow," growled the gumshoe, and cut down on a confused blur of gray without any noticeable result.

It was beginning to be impressed upon him that darkness was giving the outlaws a distinct advantage. For some little distance around the shack, the sage had been cleared away. Anyone moving across that pale circle of alkali crusted earth could be seen plainly. Beyond it, a man could creep from sage clump to sage clump in comparative safety.

The special agent wet his dry lips and turned to look over at the bulky piece of darkness which was Mr. Two-Fox. "'Bout time we made our break, ain't it?" he called in a hoarse whisper. "We gotta do it quick—the gang's closin' in."

Billy took one more look at the two ill-defined forms holding a confab at the west side of the clearing, then padded over to the door. "Me ready," he grunted.

"All set, eh? Well, this is the way we'll do it. I'll crawl out the door, an' keep to the shadders till I get around under the window. She's plenty dark to hide me if I stick clos't to the wall. While I'm crawlin', yuh get set back of the door. Soon as I give a whistle like this," Lippy demonstrated softly, "yuh tear outta here an' keep a-goin'. Savvy?"

"Me give um yell—run for creek plenty fast," grunted Billy with enthusiasm.

"Sure—go ahead and holler if yuh want to," agreed Lippy. "It's your funeral."

"What um mean?"

Lippy didn't trouble to answer. Dropping on his knees he went out the door, trailing his rifle after him. Billy stood silently listening to the occasional rattle of a clod as the government man hurried on his way. For the first time that day, his massive countenance became benevolent. Mr. Two-Fox had no more intention of exposing his corpulent frame to gun fire than a coyote has of stepping in a jump trap.

Feeling his way back into the room, he grasped the black lump that was his bed roll and swung it to his shoulder. A few feet inside the doorway he half crouched, waiting for the officer's signal. A soft whistle came through the window. Then the sound of feet on dusty earth. Mr. Two-Fox drew a deep breath and rushed the door. His moccasined heel thudded on the step. One more stride he took, caught himself neatly as a weight thrower, and sent his blankets rolling out into the clear. In the same breath, Billy hugged the wall and waited for results.

He had no room for disappointment. Before the blankets had stopped rolling, vermilion splashes of flame were leaping from the sage beyond the clearing. Lead buried itself in the blankets with muffled squashing sounds. A little to the south, another gun opened fire.

"Hey—cut it! That ain't him. He's Injin trickin' us," came a voice from over in the sage, a disgusted, somehow familiar voice. "Try a few through the buildin'."

Mr. Two-Fox waited to learn no more. He jumped for the door, intent upon getting belly down on the floor. Behind him, he heard running feet, whirled. A lowered head caught him violently in the stomach and hurled him to one side. By the faint light, Billy had a flashing glimpse of the gumshoe. Lippy was also headed for the floor. For no good reason at all, Mr. Two-Fox grabbed at him in time to catch a handfull of shirt tail. Lippy screwed around with an infuriated hiss.

"Turn loose a' me—yuh damned Siwash!"

Without waiting to see whether Mr. Two-Fox was going to or not, he jerked up his revolver and fired point blank at the Yakima's outthrust stomach. Billy was lunging sideways at the same time. Powder smoke seared his shirt and a bullet stung his floating ribs. Almost immediately one of the outlaws started shooting at the flash. Lippy pulled away with a cry shrill as a speared rabbit. Mr. Two-Fox dived for the ground outside.

His mind was in something of a maze, his thoughts bewildered. He couldn't understand Lippy's sudden change of front. Thinking on it, he realized that the officer hadn't run at all after he had whistled. "Him run away standin' still," muttered Billy angrily. "Why him try shoot um me, huh?"

CONCENTRATING on the mystery, it finally dawned on Billy that the government man had been planning on using him as a decoy from the first. When Billy had attempted the same tactics, Lippy had lost his temper and tried to slaughter him. Inside the shack, Billy could hear the latter fumbling around, spitting out a snarling gibber of thwarted profanity.

Mr. Two-Fox couldn't see himself outlining himself in the doorway. Not with the law man in such a murderous mood. He wriggled forward on his stomach to the northeast corner of the shack and lay there in miserable silence. A harried light was in his sunken eyes. Deep creases grooved his full cheeks on either side the downcurving corners of his mouth.

All the time his troubles were getting worse, he mused gloomily. Nor did he like the quiet that had once more settled on the valley. It reminded him of the sultry calm preceding a storm.

From over to the west an owl suddenly burst into a quavering song. At least, it was supposed to be an owl. To Billy's ear it had the sound of an outlaw signal. All at once, lead started flying again. Billy could see the dashes of flame, a confused movement in the sage, then more flashes.

From east and west and south, the lead poured in, eating through the shack's flimsy walls like buckshot through cardboard. Mr. Two-Fox's left ear was pressed against the ground. Through a lull in the firing he imagined he heard running footsteps. Then very distinctly, he heard something strike the west wall.

"By golly—what um hell now?" groaned Billy.

He hitched forward in time to see an ill-defined silhouette sprinting back to

the cover of the sage. Inside the shack, Lippy was moving restlessly. He too had heard the owl cry and the thump against the wall. Biting his lips, he ventured over to the window and risked a glance down at the ground. A red dot glowed through the darkness. Lippy's nostrils twitched as they caught a whiff of burning fuse. It was an odor that Lippy recognized. With a startled yelp, he whirled around to dive wildly for the door.

Mr. Two-Fox heard him coming and got ready to depart himself. That much he remembered distinctly. Other details of what happened during the next few minutes were a trifle blurred. Mr. Two-Fox had an impression of the world torn asunder, of a thunderous upheaval, a flash of light, and flying boards that battered him down like the hooves of an enraged cayuse. Dust and biting acrid smoke welled up about him in a blinding, stifling cloud. Some heavy weight caught him from behind, drove his nose into the ground, and whacked him mightily across the back of the neck.

For a couple of minutes, the Yakima lay stunned, unable to form the vaguest notion of what had caused the maelstrom. At first he was unable to realize it had been a charge of dynamite going off. Much less that the outlaw who had ridden north that afternoon, realizing the impenetrableness of Lippy's fortress, had brought back the powder monkey from the Satus road repair gang to blast him out.

What Mr. Two-Fox was anxious to find out was whether he himself was dead or alive. He groaned heavily and decided that a part of him at least had survived. A jaw full of alkali dust was interfering with his breathing. Furthermore, the sharp end of a one-by-ten was shoving his head still deeper into the dust. Billy got agitated and slammed a palm violently into the pointed end of a ten penny nail.

At this point Mr. Two-Fox's sense of reason went haywire. A red mist enveloped his brain cells as well as sight. He gave a grunt like a bull hung up on a barbed wire fence, and proceeded to make a furious pass at the one-by-ten. This offending bit of plank moved over so a piece of studding could drop on the Yakima's outstretched fingers. Mr. Two-Fox let out an explosive hiss that would have made a boa constrictor green with envy. He raised his head and blew a streamer of dust out of both nostrils.

"By golly—me goin' kill somebody!" he remarked determinedly, in a hoarse and drunken voice.

He floundered around in an enraged frenzy to finally poke his bullet head up through a mess of wreckage that had once been Coleman's herder shack. Over to his right, he heard footsteps. Billy groped around purposefully but silently, scraped his knuckles on a nest of splinters, and at last found what he wanted. A three foot piece of two-by-four studding.

SHADOWS were moving stealthily through the dust fog that hid the milky light of the stars. A deathlike silence had settled on the heels of the explosion's dying echoes. Someone stumbled over a loose board with a muted "Look out fer them damn nails." The white ray of a flashlight cut through the fog.

"Here's somethin'," called a screechy voice. The light switched to the left.

"Yeh, that's him, the lousy—— Hey you, drop that gun! Damn yore black soul, you'll git lead in yore guts, try that on me!" A pause, then a yell. "We got 'im, boys!"

"Sure 'nough?" and "I'm a-comin'," came from opposite sides of the clearing.

Mr. Two-Fox heard approaching footsteps. The red in his smarting eyes narrowed down to pinpointed flames. He made out an indistinct figure; stepped cat-footedly in that direction. Blood dripped down his beak of a nose. The tatters of his shirt hung limply from the flowing muscles of his sloping shoulders. The piece of studding, death-gripped in his mutilated hands, came up to a convenient perpendicular as he crept silently along.

"Damn cultus mans!" he said in an infuriated whisper.

One of the outlaws bent over Lippy suddenly straightened. "Seemed to me I heered somethin'?"

"Heered it myself," said the other. "Might 'a' been boards settlin'. Mebbe Ed comin' up. Hey Ed—that you?"

"Yeh, I'm a-comin'," said a voice off to the left of where the two were looking. From the same direction there came a grunt, a thud, and what sounded as

though Ed had stumbled and fallen down. Ed had.

"He sure is gettin' awkward in his old age," remarked the outlaw with the flashlight. "Funny, he ain't cussin'?"

"Dang funny!"

For Ed wasn't usually one to pass up such a golden opportunity. A shuffling sound came from his direction. A padding sound such as might have been made by the cushioned feet of a stalking mountain lion. The outlaw with the flashlight frowned uneasily, and turned his light to investigate. A squat shadow rushed toward him from out of the gloom. The outlaw had a glimpse of a hawkish, horribly grimacing face. Before he could grab his holstered gun, a three foot piece of studding caught him squarely on the side of the head. He keeled over like a wheat shock in a gust of wind.

"Hi-i-i, damn um!" yowled Mr. Two-Fox, taking a blood-thirsty swipe at the fallen man's partner.

This party ducked his head and shoved a six-gun at the Yakima's paunch barely in time to get it hit by the descending club. The gun went sailing off into the darkness. Its owner attempted a flying turn with one heel of his cowboy boots hooked between a couple of boards. He flopped down heavily on his back with a strangled cry of fright. Mr. Two-Fox stepped in close to polish him off when a loose piece of stovepipe gave him warning of someone in his rear.

Billy ducked instinctively, whirled on a heel, and swung the studding in a wide and vicious circle. A vague figure loomed up behind him. Billy gave a savage grunt as the studding took this latter person full in the chest to knock him flatter than the proverbial pancake. The club was torn from Billy's hands by the force of the impact. He gave angry grunt and grabbed it up again.

"Hi-i-i, me fix um cultus mans!" he grumbled gutturally, and spun on around to finish working on the gent who had stumbled.

This badman, sensing rather than seeing the Indian, had already developed an all-powerful desire to depart. He rolled to his feet, fell down again, and with a wild leap commenced traveling in the direction of Satus creek. Billy made a pass at him with the club and set out in pursuit.

"Hi-i-i-i!" he whooped.

This war cry ruined whatever chance he might have had of overtaking the fugitive. The latter opened up across the clearing like a jackrabbit burnt by buckshot. Mr. Two-Fox, seeing himself outdistanced at the start, turned back to put a few final touches on the three who had already gone down beneath his piece of studding.

The night air was beginning to cool off his fury anyhow. In its place had come a crafty speculation as to whether there might not be some rewards out for the gang. The thing for him to do, he decided, was to tie the three up and take them in to his good tilicum Sheriff Cadwell. With this purpose in mind, Billy waddled energetically back to the gentleman who had taken the club in the chest.

THIS cultus man was getting a bit uncertainly to his feet as Billy came up behind him. Mr. Two-Fox gave him a gentle rap over the pate and bent down to relieve him of any spare artillery. The wind had by this time blown away most of the dust. Billy could see fairly well what he was doing. He had pulled a gun out of the outlaw's shoulder holster and was reaching to search his pockets when something bright and shiny on the victim's vest caught his eye.

The Yakima's breath came in a sudden dismayed gulp. "What um hell?" He bent closer to the unconscious outlaw, beady eyes bulging in fearful anticipation. A low groan slid from between Billy's gaping lips as he recognized the handsome features of "Good Lookin" Jess Cavender, Sheriff Cadwell's pet deputy.

Mr. Two-Fox's blood did not exactly freeze in his veins, but he did have a feeling as though an icy gust had just blown up what was left of his shirt tail. Clucking and grunting noises got all mixed up in his windpipe. He dropped his club, picked it up again, glanced guiltily over his shoulder as though he had been prodded by an accusing finger. "Ugh—what me goin' do?" he groaned dismally.

He thought of administering first aid, then quickly changed his mind. He didn't want that posse coming to and identifying him. Not Mr. Two-Fox. His attention at this point was attracted by

Lippy Evans, alias the Pasco Kid, getting to his feet and looking over the scene of the battle.

"Government man—him, government man, huh?" muttered Billy with dreadful solemnity. He cat-footed deliberately in that direction, sudden illumination flooding his one-track mind.

Lippy, who had been caught just outside the doorway at the time of the explosion, was still a bit wobbly on his pins. His weasel mind, however, was perfectly clear. Dame fortune, it seemed to him had prepared a perfect get-away. He stepped over to the lanky posseman who had wielded the flashlight to take possession of a small oblong package which the latter had removed from inside his shirt. Lippy had just retrieved it and his six-gun when Mr. Two-Fox came silently up beside him.

"What you ketchum?" wheezed the Yakima.

"This here," said Lippy. Having seen the Indian lay out the possemen, he was inclined to be in a brotherly mood. "Loot that was lifted off the stage. Dang if I hadn't oughta split it with yuh, helpin' me out that way." He stowed the package carefully away in his hip pocket. "Yuh sure did lay that punk deputy out, big boy, didn't yuh!"

"Uh huh—me fix um," agreed Billy noncommittally. Darkness hid the flame that burnt anew in his deep-set little eyes. He stepped closer. Braced his bandy legs and swung the studding in a whistling arc. "Fix um you, too! Damn um cultus crook!"

He gave a little *hi-i-i-i* as the cause of his afternoon's misery collapsed. Here, at least, was means of partially squaring himself with the government. Billy bent over the still breathing gunman to rip off the black shirt and utilize it for hog-tieing. Before he had finished, the lanky posseman was beginning to come back to life. Mr. Two-Fox tied a final knot, gave Lippy a kick in the stomach, and stood for a moment scowling venomously down at his handiwork. With a satisfied grunt he hurried away to find his blankets, shouldering them, he padded away into the veiling shadows of the night.

Evidently this sheepherder shack was no place for a man to catch a quiet bit of shut eye. He might just as well go back to his own teepee. There would be some clam soup left, anyway.

A real story of the big-time rodeo riders and the bad horses they ride——maybe!

"Sundown"

by

BUD LA MAR

HE KNOWS HIS RODEOS

IN

NEXT

WEST

The CAVERN OF ENDLESS NIGHT

By George Rosenberg

Author of "The Silver Buzzard," "The Horse that Couldn't be Rode," etc.

Ross McCairn nearly frightens to death a whole hard-boiled posse.

ROSS McCAIRN, fugitive, pulled his lathered pinto to a halt on the lofty rim of Azula Mesa. It was a rash, foolhardy thing to do. For he hadn't a single minute to waste. And one misstep now, one miscalculation, would mean capture and return to that gray hell from which he had escaped. He was a jail-breaker, McCairn. Memory of prison was a savage knife thrust in his heart; threat of prison hovered over him like a great hawk—likely at any instant to hurtle, meteor-swift, upon its victim. Yet, here, he reined to a stop.

Far below this high mesa half a world spread out. Grassy swales lay burnished with sunset fire. Arroyos were filled with pearly mist; and lava hills and buttes, sand-blasted into fantasy, stood purple against the west. One by one, at all of these, McCairn gazed with the starved, aching eagerness of a man who has had to cherish his visions in darkness and utter loneliness.

His riding mate, Tex Sanchez, reined over into a clump of greasewood.

"Ross!" he called. "Ross! For gosh sake, man, come on! You're standin' up against the sky like a signpost. If that posse from Ballarat sights you, you'll never make it to the Border!"

Ross McCairn did not hear. He was years deep in memories. He knew this country like a man knows the face of his brother.

This broad valley of Mundo Verde Basin was a paradise for beef cattle. Its bottoms were lush with grama and filaree and wild oats, and it was well-

watered by that winding ribbon of silver, Tahquitz Creek. In the blue-hazy distance were ranches McCairn knew—the Turkey Track, Bar Cross, Frying Pan, and his own spread, the Circle M. Beyond them glittered the red roofs and whitewashed walls of Tres Pinos. And far to the south lay the jumbled, tortured, Godforsaken badlands of the Thunder Hills. Tier on tier they rose, to the great spiked wall of Sierra Cuchillo Range.

Four long years had passed since McCairn had last looked upon this country—four years of his life wasted behind iron bars and walls of grim gray stone, in a stupor of bitterness and despair. Four endless, aching, crawling eternities they had been. Four years out of a stretch of twenty that the law had condemned him to.

Ross uncovered his dark head to the October sun. His gray eyes lost their steely glint. Over his face—so lean, so wind-bitten, so iron-hard—flashed a warmth, as recollection of a bygone time burned hot and bright within him. He straightened his tall, lithe body in the saddle, and lifted his broad shoulders as he filled his lungs with the desert air.

It was like heady wine, that air, spiked with tang of juniper and black sage—not raw and clawing in one's throat, not thick with the must and reek of prison. Here was sunshine, hot, bright, strengthening—not utter gloom, gray and dreary as a fever-bearing miasma. Here were hope, freedom, elbow room as far as the eye could pierce into distance. Here was work, hard grinding toil of cowcamp and roundup; and here was comradeship, men to ride with, men to yarn with—not that heartbreaking loneliness, not that festering despair of prison where life moved in a dark, sullen current as monotonous and crushing as eternity in a black box.

"It's good," Ross thought aloud, "it's good to be home again."

"Home?" grunted Tex Sanchez. "Ross, you ain't out of the woods, yet! Keep your fingers crossed until we've loped through Wolf Gap an' jumped the Border."

Ross looked south across Mundo Verde toward a V-shaped notch in the distant mountains that was Wolf Gap.

"Tex," he said slowly, "I'm not lopin' south with you. Not tonight."

Sept. 17-30

SANCHEZ stared at him, aghast, unbelieving.

"Smokes, Ross! Have you gone *loco?*"

"No. I'm goin' to stop at the Circle M. I'll meet you in Wolf Gap tomorrow night."

"But—blue blazes, man, you're takin' one helluva chance!" Sanchez almost wept. "Right now, I bet posse men are watchin' your ranch like hounds squattin' around a fox hole. You'll be gang-jumped!"

"I'll risk it," Ross said. Bitter thoughts shadowed his stern face. He was thirty, McCairn, but looked ten years older. "Tex," he went on gravely, "you know something about me—that I was convicted of stealin' cattle an' shootin' a Mex night herder. That I was sent up for twenty years. . . . But you don't know that I was framed—railroaded to a livin' death because some *hombre* was slick enough to lay the blame for that murder onto me."

"Sanchez murmured. "I should've guessed that!"

"Tonight," Ross continued, "I'll lay over at my ranch an' have a powwow with Phil Baird, my partner. Maybe he's found out who *did* corpse that Mex waddy an' put the killer brand on me. I've got an enemy. I don't know who he is. But if Phil has nosed him out, I want to appear unto that hombre with words on my tongue an' a six-gun in my fist."

Sanchez reined over beside Ross and laid a friendly hand on his shoulder.

"Oldtimer," he warned earnestly, "don't go to your ranch. You'll walk slam-bang into a trap. You'll be thrown back into jail. . . . Ride along with me, Ross!

"See that ridge over to the west? On top of it there's a trail. It's almost hidden by manzanita an' scrub oak, so only muledeer an' bighorns travel it. Lopin' that trail tonight we can slip past Mundo Verde like puffs of smoke in a high wind! You'll escape so fast an' so far that the law will think you took a hop-skip-jump into nowhere. An' by tomorrow noon, you'll be safe in Mexico. It's a cinch, Ross—it's positive sure! You'll ride with me?"

But again Ross shook his head.

"No, Tex. I want to see Phil Baird. I'll meet you in Wolf Gap."

"Yeah—if you ain't grabbed by a posse," Tex qualified dismally. "'Cause *then,* it'll be back to the big stone house for Ross McCairn!"

"No, Tex. Huh-uh. Even if I'm caught, I'm never goin' back to prison. Savvy"

Tex stared; face pale, his eyes suddenly hot and bright, he stared at Ross. His glance dropped to Ross's six-gun; he understood.

"I savvy. You won't go back to jail —not *alive,* you won't!"

He swung his horse around.

"Well, I'm ridin'. *Adios,* Ross. See you in Wolf Gap tomorrow night!"

ROSS dismounted in the Circle M barn at midnight. He tossed pebbles at Phil Baird's window; getting no answer, he decided that Baird must be at some line camp. Then, for he had not shut an eye in two nights, Ross went to sleep in the hayloft.

Hours later, he woke abruptly, his senses leaping to alertness. Somehow, he had a queer feeling that he had slept too long, that he was in desperate trouble. Glancing through the hayloft door, he saw that the sun was at its noonday height.

That wasn't all he saw. His heart skipped a beat in dismay as he observed six riders dismounting in front of the ranch-house. Four of them ran around to the rear. The last two strode up to the front door, and the leader hammered on it with his pistol butt. Ross could see, for the barn was off to one side of the cabin. Each man, he noticed, wore a badge on his chest.

"Good gosh, a posse!" Ross groaned. "That's Gary Hollister poundin' on the door. Damn him, I reckon he's still chief deputy for Sheriff Neile."

In response to Hollister's knock, that front door opened.

And Ross stared in utter amazement at the person who came out. A girl it was, a lovely girl, a slim young girl in a yellow dress. Tall, lissom, she had bronzy red hair that shone in the sun with a thousand golden high-lights.

Gary Hollister flung questions at her. She shook her head in answer, then stepped aside and the deputies entered the cabin.

Ross warned himself, "That posse will search the house. Next, they'll go through this barn like coyotes through a hen roost. I got to climb my hoss an' make a break for it!"

Then, over the range from the south, he saw another rider approaching. And as he recognized Phil Baird, Ross laughed ruefully. Of course Phil would come just as he had to make a desperate try to leave without carrying away some lead under his hide!

As Baird reined up in front of the cabin, the deputies on guard came to meet him. He called a cheery hello to the posse men, and dismounted. Swiftly they drew pistol. Their sharp "Stick 'em up, Baird!" was plainly heard by Ross.

They disarmed Phil, handcuffed him, and yelled for their chief. Gary Hollister came out of the house.

Ross could not hear much, but he was able to tell that Hollister accused Phil Baird of something—and that Baird denied it furiously. But anyhow, he was lifted into saddle, and the whole band loped south toward Tres Pinos—all except Hollister. He went into the house with that pretty, auburn-haired girl. She was arguing and pleading with him.

"Phil's in trouble," Ross concluded. "It's lucky I'm here to help him. Wonder what it's all about?"

He left the barn. Warily he darted back of the ranch-house and eased into the kitchen. Here, he heard voices in the next room—a girl's sweet young voice, pleading, and Hollister's deep-chested rumble.

"But I *want* to know!" she was saying. "Tell me. You must tell me!"

Bluntly came the answer, "Nancy, your brother's got a murder charge starin' him in the face."

Ross heard her step back, recoiling. In a low, stricken tone she asked presently, "He—he'll be sent to prison?"

"Not unless he's really lucky."

"What do you mean?" she demanded, terrified. "Please, *please* talk plain! What will they do to Phil?"

"Remember what I told you about my posse?" Hollister reminded her, grimly. "They'll lynch Phil. Tonight."

"But he's innocent, Gary! He's innocent!"

"Maybe so. But anyhow, tonight he's goin' to hang."

"Gary," she pleaded, "can't you *stop* those posse men?"

"No. . . . Huh-uh! It 'ud be easier to halt an avalanche."

"But couldn't you smuggle Phil out of jail?"

"I could," he admitted. "But I won't."

"Why not? I don't understand?"

"Y'see, Nancy, if Phil isn't lynched tonight, later on the law will hang him anyhow. To save his neck, I'd have to smuggle him all the way to Mexico. Doin' that would make me an outlaw. I'd lose my job, my rep, my friends—everything! No, I won't sneak him out of jail. Not unless——"

"Unless *what?*"

"Nancy," he said, his tone low, earnest, persuading, "you know I'd rather have you than anything else on this round green earth. I can save Phil. I'll do it, too, if you'll say the word. I'll break him out of jail, an' smuggle him south, clean across the Border, if you'll come with us. If you'll marry me. Will you?"

ROSS heard her gasp at this proposal. He moved to the door then, pushed it open a fraction of an inch, and peered into the next room.

The girl was facing Hollister bravely, her slim young body tensed. Her cheeks were pale, and her fine gray eyes flashed with anger.

"Marry *you,* Gary?" she whipped back, her words sharp with scorn. "No. A thousand times no! I don't trust you. I've never even *liked* you since we first met. And now, I hate you. Hate you! . . . I can't forget that once you told me you'd do *anything* to get what you wanted. I think you're using Phil's trouble to force me to marry you. Well, I won't. You hear? I won't! I won't! I'd rather die than feel your arms around me!"

"You'll change," he prophesied somberly.

A man of supreme confidence in himself, Gary Hollister. He was thirty-two, six feet tall, muscled like a grizzly, handsome in a strong, weather-beaten way. His hair was a sun-bleached yellow and his eyes were blue, and he sported a trim mustache. Always he dressed like a dandy in calfskin vest and rakish batwing chaps. About his waist were buckled two pearl-handled six-guns. No mere ornaments, these weapons; Hollister was deadly fast on the draw.

"Nancy," he went on, "right now, if a bolt from the blue struck me, you'd be real pleased. But later on you won't hate me. Oh, you'll marry me, all right! You'd rather die than do it—but you'd rather do it than let *Phil* die. I know you. You'd do anything in the world to save Phil from swingin' in the breeze at the end of a rope."

"I won't. Never, never will I let you touch me!"

His face darkened, but he said carelessly, "Send me word which way you're choosin'. I'll be at the sheriff's office in Tres Pinos until sundown." And he turned to go.

"I won't! I——"

BUT Hollister was gone. Nancy sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

Ross stepped into the room.

She lifted her head, saw him. Her gray eyes widened with fright—and then she recognized him, and a cry burst from her. She darted toward him, and her soft arms tightened about his neck.

"Ross! Ross! *You!* Oh, I'm so glad—so glad——"

Clinging to him, she wept. He stroked her lustrous hair, and spoke to her soothingly. Four years ago Baird's little sister had been a shy kid, all thin legs and long pigtails. Now she was grown. Now she was in the full bloom of her youth, radiant and sweet as a Mariposa lily.

"Nancy," he said, "you leave off askin' me questions till later. Right now, you tell me why that posse arrested Phil."

She explained. "Ross, a small gang of holdups have been simply terrorizing this country. Nobody knows who they are. This morning, they shot and robbed another man. Hollister and his deputies searched the spot where it happened, and claim they found signs to prove that *Phil* had a hand in this last holdup—that he did the shooting."

Ross thought aloud, "So that's why Hollister nabbed Phil! I don't trust that limb of the law. Six years ago, I caught Hollister brand-blotchin' a calf, an' I rearranged his personal geography with my fists. Go on, honey. How come Phil might be lynched?"

She dabbed at her gray eyes with a handkerchief, then went on, "Ross, that gang of road agents killed two deputies some time back. A cousin of one, and a brother of the second of those murdered men, are on Hollister's posse. You see? Those deputies are mad for revenge. They won't wait for the law to—to settle their score. Hollister says that tonight his riders will mask themselves, break Phil out of jail, and hang him. Ross, you've got to save my brother. I *know* you can!"

Ross said nothing, but thought hard to himself, looking this trouble over from every possible angle. Helping Phil appeared such a mean risky job, so tough a nut to crack, that for a space Ross found himself wishing that he had ridden south to Mexico with Tex Sanchez. By this time he would have been safe across the Border—with no regrets, and all the world to look forward to. But now, after the first heart-sick moment, he knew that he could not ride off and let his partner be strung up like a horse thief. No. He simply had to stay, *had* to take every possible chance to save Phil Baird from lynch law.

"Nancy," he asked, "how many men in that posse so hell-bent on mobbin' Phil?"

"Eight, Ross."

A SCHEME occurred to Ross. It was a good plan, an audacious plan. It was one of the most lawless, bang-up, hell-raising ideas ever jolted into his brain. It would work. It would save Baird from being guest of honor at a lynching bee staged by those deputies. That was certain.

It was, however, just as positive-sure that this scheme would plunge Ross McCairn into a quicksand of trouble he'd never fight out of.

If he wasn't killed saving Phil, Ross foresaw that he would be shipped back to that big house of gray stone. Back to that ghastly tomb of ghostly men. Back to that heart-breaking loneliness, that unending dreariness, that eternity of sullen waiting. Either that, or——Ross's hand tightened on his gun butt.

If only he had ridden back to Mexico with Tex Sanchez! If only he were selfish enough to let Phil go hang, and high-tail it to the Border, now!

"Nancy," Ross said slowly, wincingly, "I want you to lope to Wolf Gap. You'll meet a waddy there by name of Tex Sanchez. Tell him not to wait for me. Tell him I'm not ridin' to Mexico. . . . Right now, honey, you find me another six-gun. I'm goin' to try an' argue Hollister's posse into treatin' Phil like a visitin' congressman."

She nodded, her eyes shining with hope. Hastily she found another Colt forty-five for him. He buckled it on, started to leave.

"One thing more, Nancy," he added, at the door. "You tell Sanchez not to worry about me. Tell him I'm not—*not ever*—goin' back to prison. He'll understand."

AN HOUR later, Ross jogged down the main street of Tres Pinos. Past saloons and stores and hotels he rode, straight to the Cattlemen's Bank in the center of town.

Dismounting, he hitched his gun holsters well forward, and stalked into the bank.

Just inside the door he halted, glanced around. In the cages toward the rear stood a teller and a cashier. Along the desk to the right wall were half-a-dozen customers, making out checks and hunting errors in their stubs. Several men looked idly at Ross.

Of a sudden, he seemed hit by an attack of cramps. Violent, rib-knotting bends they were, for he doubled up and crumpled to the floor, groaning as if he'd swallowed a fish-hook cactus.

Immediately the teller and cashier deserted their sheltered niches; immediately the customers left off wrangling accounts. All crowded around Ross, bent over him, chafed his wrists and poured whisky down his throat.

That corn liquor worked marvels, it seemed. He improved so much that the cashier and teller helped him to his feet. In fact, he was able, then, to stand erect. They let go of him, stepped back.

And then his hands flashed to holsters, came up grasping a pistol in each fist.

"Jack 'em up!" he snapped. "High! Now, all of you move over against that left wall, *pronto*. All but you, Mr. Cashier. I see a satchel in your cubby. You hike back there an' stuff that leather case hog-fat with paper money. Hop, damn you! Hop, or I'll spur you in the heel with a bullet!"

The cashier hopped. He stuffed that

case with bills. Then he brought the satchel to Ross.

"Now," he ordered, "all you hombres fall flat on the floor, faces down. Drop, you varmints!"

The varmints dropped. And Ross, for moral effect, sent a couple bullets splintering into the floor near them. Then he made a sudden exit.

He turned, darted into the street, vaulted into saddle. Straight down that main road he lunged at a break-neck gallop, six-gun belching fire and thunder, wild Comanche yells bursting from his lips.

That thoroughfare was crowded with horses and wagons and people. Ross cleared it with the sudden, violent magic of a stampeding cyclone. Peace-loving folk dived for shelter. Staid old wagon horses discovered they still had fire in their bellies—and lit for home with considerable interest. Down the street careened one runaway after another, playing whipcracker with buck board and surry and hayframe, sideswiping hitch-racks crowded with saddle broncs. Pack burros, waiting patiently outside of beer oases, acted up like spooky mustangs. Six mournful jackasses went on a tear in the Last Chance Saloon. A wall-eyed pinto, a hammer-headed roan and a ewe-necked bay started lobbying in the Democrat Hotel, crashing into notice by entering through a plate-glass window.

On down the street Ross galloped, leaving panic in his wake. The sheriff's office was ahead of him. The hullabaloo he was spreading would announce his coming, he realized. So he was ready when he saw Sheriff Neile, Gary Hollister, and a couple other deputies charge out into the road, directly in his way.

He plunged straight down on them, guns blazing, hurtling forward like a meteor.

A bullet hissed past his ear. His own first shot tumbled Neile into the dust with a slug through his leg. Hollister bent and dragged his chief out of the path of Ross's oncoming bronc. Ross felt a tug at his sombrero, and a slash along his thigh, as bullets felt for him. Then his second shot knocked the pistol from Red Conway's hand, and Ross swerved his pinto straight down onto the fourth deputy. That hombre leaped like a jackrabbit for the shelter of the sheriff's office. He lit on hands and knees, presenting a southern exposure to Ross. Ross sent a hot bullet toward the southern exposure—and streaked on out of town, the deputy's anguished yowl rising in a blue spiral back of him.

TRES PINOS behind, Ross galloped southward toward the Thunder Hills. Topping the first swell, he reined to a halt and looked back.

A posse was leaving Tres Pinos. In a long file, they were quirting their broncs to top speed. One, two—seven riders in all.

"The whole pack of deputies, minus one crippled hombre," he reflected. "Well, they won't stretch Phil Baird's neck tonight. Nor any other night, if my plan works. I'm goin' to lead these law-johnnies into the mountains an' make most of 'em stay put a while. It ain't a right healthy job, for *me*. It has one advantage, though. These hombres won't haze Ross McCairn back to prison. Not with him in any shape to know about it!"

Ross loped up the canyon of Tahquitz Creek. He rode along the stream bank, leaving an easy trail for the posse to follow.

When the gorge swung westward, he spurred to the top of the left wall and halted, outlined against the afternoon sky as plain as a cross on a steeple. Looking back, he saw the posse a quarter-mile behind.

"They're quirtin' the hair off their broncs, an' gainin' on me," he observed, smiling grimly. "They likely figure on treein' me by sundown. Maybe they will, too."

Straight south he rode, higher and higher into the Thunder Hills.

The sun arched down into the west. Ross's bronc began to flag. Across a great boulder wash he picked his way. He zig-zagged up a steep slope to an upland flat. Slowly, carefully, he angled across a wide shretch of *malpais,* over a far-flung fan of volcanic badland pitted and scarred with cracks and pot-holes. And finally, at a great canyon cross-roads, he halted, as if perplexed which of four ways to ride.

Behind him, a shout rose up. He glanced back. The posse was an eighth of a mile off, and shortening that distance with every jump. As if on impulse, as if panicky, he dashed headlong

into the nearest of the four canyons ahead of him.

This particular gorge had high, sheer walls of granite and was so narrow at bottom that a horseman, to ride along comfortably, had to keep his elbows close to his sides.

Into this canyon Ross galloped for a couple miles. Then he reached its upper end. His trail finished abruptly at the base of a lofty cliff of granite, purple with lichen and stained by water. And the wall on either side was too steep for anything but a lizard to climb. Ross could go no farther. He was in a trap. The only way out was to lope back toward that oncoming posse.

But Ross did not want to get out of this blind corner.

He dismounted, and strode to the base of that granite cliff. Here, as he had found it long before, was a dark, gloomy archway. It was the entrance to a cave. From it now issued a swarm of bats, small Mexican free-tailed bats, swirling out and up like a streamer of smoke.

Ross bent over a fallen pine nearby, and wrenched off dry branches; he would have torches a-plenty.

Once again a yell rose up behind him. The posse was coming on at a gallop. Ross glanced at them.

"You got me trapped, all right," he said aloud. "But damn you, you're shoutin' out of turn. Before long you all will be thinkin' you grabbed a grizzly by the tail."

Money satchel in one hand, pine torches in the other, Ross stalked to that cave entrance. Here he bent, peered inside—into utter blackness, into a region of midnight darkness as old as the mountains. Out of the opening breathed a chill current of air that told of vast depths, confusing, forbidding.

Ross hesitated. An icy finger of dread seemed laid upon his heart as he remembered a former trip into this underground world. But he resolutely pushed aside all misgivings, and lunged into the cave.

The posse, seeing him thus walk into a tight corner, yelped again in triumph. Ross McCairn had crawled into a hole. They would jerk him out again as easily as digging up a fox!

"We got 'im!" Gary Hollister shouted to his men. "He's trapped as snug as a deer in a dead-fall!"

UNDER Hollister's orders, the posse built a huge fire at the mouth of the cave. Waving saddle-blankets, they forced the smoke into the black depths.

With no success. Ross McCairn did not yell quits, did not come charging out, six-guns blazing.

"Men," Hollister declared, "this cave must be too big to fill with smoke. We got to go in after McCairn."

"He'll snipe us," Jed Leigh objected.

"Damn it, I'll go in *first* then!" Hollister roared. "I won't take a torch, so he won't see me. You all follow. If he shoots, or shows a light, I'll drop him with a bullet."

Stooping, Hollister disappeared into the black archway. His men lit torches, and followed in single file.

At first they found themselves in an ordinary earth-walled passage. On the floor were bits of broken pottery, arrow heads, bleached bones.

Abruptly, with breath-taking suddenness, the deputies were out of this drab passage and in an immense underground chamber. Lifting their torches up, the posse men stared around—and forgot the fugitive they hunted, forgot everything but the startling wonder of what they saw.

They stood in an immense limestone cave. It overawed them. It struck them dumb with surprise. It made them feel puny, dwarfed, unclean. For it towered over them like a great cathedral—dazzlingly bright, lovely beyond belief, everywhere washed with an unearthly whiteness that sparkled and gleamed with iridescent fires. Vast pillars, marvelously fluted, upheld a high vaulted roof. Tapestries draped the walls, tapestries worked with frost lace and filigrees of crystals like diamonds; hangings of pearly onyx so delicate it seemed a wind would ripple them. At the rear, stood a massive altar of snowy marble, and behind it rose a lofty organ. Overhead, far overhead, drooped great chandeliers of a thousand glistening pendants. In niches around the sides reposed saints more ancient than history. And on the floor were dripstone figures like worshippers, kneeling and unmoving in century-old adoration.

Here in this temple of the stony dead was silence, ghastly silence, still, taut, breathless, unbroken in aeons of time. A hoarse breath rasped in that tense

quiet like fingernails drawn across sandpaper. A footstep stirred little thrilling echoes that rolled on and on. A cough was like the bursting of a glass bubble—crystal fragments of sound went jostling and clattering through the cave and spilled into side chambers and ricocheted into the farthest corners.

"Hollister," Seth Murdock blurted, his voice ringing hollow, "there's a million an' one rooms in here. We'll get lost like kids in a deep woods."

"Forget it!" Hollister snapped. "Look! across the cave—that light!"

Far across the great temple, a scarlet flame struck into the black darkness. Just for a moment; then it was gone, as though darting into another hall.

"That's McCairn's torch" Hollister rapped out. "Come on. We'll get him!"

He lunged into a run. His men followed in single file. Where they had glimpsed a torch, they found a vast corridor. Then again, far ahead, they sighted a light like a will o' the wisp. This they pursued, running, stumbling, panting for breath.

That corridor of giants was miles long. On its far-apart walls the posse's torches goaded shadows into a mad, fantastic dance.

GOING became rough. Bulging white domes of flowstone, like mushrooms, swelled from the floor. A forest of totem poles blocked the road: grotesque tall figures, heads of bear and wolf and eagle in outlandish mixture rearing up on snowy columns. Through them the deputies passed. Then their trail led over shallow pits like frozen lily beds, over jagged blocks of fallen limestone, huge clusters of stalactites that had avalanched from the roof. In and around these the men serpentined, feeling like a train of ants picking their way through a pile of bricks.

Deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of endless night they chased that bobbing torch. And with every pace their dread and uneasiness mounted. The ghastly silence, the ghostly white of every fantastic object, the still lifeless air, all oppressed them—weighed upon them with some nameless, horrible threat.

The corridor of giants grew low, narrow, until a man could touch both walls at once, or reach up and break a dagger from the stone icicles of the roof.

Abruptly the tunnel ended, and again the posse men found themselves in a large chamber. That elusive torch they followed had disappeared. Lifting their own lights overhead, the deputies stared around them, alert, taut-nerved. For this cave, somehow, was filled with a living presence, with a faint rushing sound like the fanning of giant wings.

Moreover, this chamber was very different from all the others: it was a blind corner. No hallways, no rooms opened off from it. It was like half of a gigantic eggshell, its domed outline utterly unbroken by any opening except that passage through which the men had entered. The floor was smooth, but slanted steeply toward the rear of the cave, now black with shadow. Overhead, immense clusters of stalactites hung—freakish and sinister in shape, like arrows and gnarled boughs and long lances and huge, misshapen war clubs. Threatening as swords suspended from threads they seemed to the posse staring below.

"What the hell's become of McCairn?" Murdock growled.

"He's in here," Hollister declared. "Got to be—no way out. Men, scatter in a straight line across this room. We'll work to the back, huntin' that fox. Shoot him on sight!"

Spread across the domed chamber, the men slowly walked toward the rear. Down that sloping floor they moved, alert, their six-guns cocked, ready to lash out in flame and smoke. Closer and closer to that back wall they advanced—and with every step they took that faint, swishing sound like the fanning of wings grew surer, stronger, swelled to a moaning shriek, unutterably weird and dreary and menacing.

Suddenly Hollister, ahead of the rest, came to an abrupt halt; and an oath of fright burst from his lips.

"Stop!" he yelled shakily. "Now come on, men—but step easy, or you'll fall into a hole deeper'n the bottom pit of hell!"

HE STOOD at the brink of a crevasse at the back of the cave. Directly before the men this yawning chasm loomed like a blanket of inky darkness. From its depths rose

a chill mist, and that whining moan of tumultuous, heaving waters.

Hollister held a torch over the black pit.

From here at his very feet, the chasm dropped down without a break, straight down. And far below, the deputies caught the glistening, surging gleam of water slithering past like a huge serpent.

Just one look, and then the men stepped fearfully back.

"Well," Jim Roberts said, his voice unsteady, "we've searched this cave an' McCairn ain't here."

"Hell he ain't!" Hollister growled. "He can't be anywhere else. Come on. We'll nose him out of hidin'."

"Aw, let him ride!" Red Conway objected. "Let's us trot out of this foxhole. I'm gettin' the willies."

"Shut your damn' mouth!" Hollister roared. "*I'm* givin' orders for this posse. You——"

He stopped, abruptly. They all forgot this argument, all became rigid, all stared at one another; in the torchlight their faces were livid, pale as death.

"Goshamighty!" Zeke Royle muttered. "What in the name o' banshees an' loupgarous is that?"

That was a low deep sound that vibrated through the cave. Hearing it, the posse men drew close together; the hackles rose on their necks. That slow, mysterious sound was music. Unearthly music, inexpressibly soft and delicate, yet ringing in every part of the room. Its rich chords swelled and mingled into a sonorous hymn. Not a hymn of peace, nor resignation—but a surging, throbbing chant of rebellion that swept along like a current, echoing and reverberating, rising to an almost unbearable pitch; then dropping down steps of sound, thinning, fading, wavering off into a tense, ghastly silence.

That quiet was struck into by a voice like a whiplash.

"Stand where you are, you law-johnnies!" came a sharp command. "Heave your six-guns down that well, an' root into your tracks!"

It was McCairn's voice!

"Men," Hollister whispered, "that outlaw is over this way, to the right. Ease along behind me. Raise your torches high, an' draw your guns. He's our meat now!"

They obeyed. And presently they located Ross. Slanting up the right wall of this cave was a ledge. At its upper end, where it widened into a balcony just under the roof, they saw McCairn. He was protected against bullets by a stone rampart.

"I got you all covered!" he shouted. "Drop your guns!"

HOLLISTER told his deputies, "We got to charge 'im! Two of you stay here an' throw lead to make him stay down behind cover. Rest of you follow me. Come on!"

Up that ledge toward Ross the posse men climbed, Hollister leading.

"Back, you fools!" Ross yelled. "Start a gun-ruckus, an' by gosh you'll never get out of here alive!"

They did not listen to his warning, did not even recognize it as a warning. On up that slanting ledge toward him they raced.

The two deputies waiting below, pressed trigger at Ross. Lances of fire spurted from their guns, and the whole cave vibrated to the crash of explosions. Ross didn't duck, however. Three or four bullets spanged into the wall over his head. Then Hollister blazed away at him. This bullet plowed along Ross's barrier, and flung stone splinters into his face.

Ross hastily took aim, and with a prayer to the special variety of good-luck that watches over rash fools, he squeezed trigger. Even as he fired, a slug creased his left arm like the slash of a jagged knife. Another hissed past his ear, struck the wall, and showered him with hot lead particles.

His bullet caught Hollister in the shoulder, and flung him spinning back onto his men. They were crowded together on the narrow ledge and their leader struck them like a ball hurtling into ten-pins. A couple of hombres flattened against the wall and clung there, but the rest went back, tumbling, sliding, yelling, falling in a heap to the floor.

Hastily they scrambled to their feet, raging mad, hot for another charge. But the six-gun shots had come fast, all close together. And the cave was vibrating like a taut shell to the boom of those explosions, which echoed and re-echoed until it seemed as if the thunders of a mountain storm had been let loose with a burst into this chamber. The

throbbing tumult beat and hammered at eardrums, seemed actually to make the rock quiver.

And hardly had its first intensity passed before there came another booming crash of tenfold its former force. And now, before a single one of the deputies could brace himself or even know what was happening, a burst of compressed air struck them, blew out their torches, and hurled the men flat to the floor, half-stunning them. . . .

Gradually the uproar subsided.

"F-for gosh sake," Red Conway whimpered, "what happened?"

"Light a torch—light 'em all!" Hollister snapped at his men, his voice unsteady. He was no fool, Hollister; he guessed what terrific damage had been done.

Matches flared; finally torches were lit. Then the posse looked around. And they forgot McCairn, forgot their hurry to get back to Tres Pinos, forgot a lynching bee resting hot on their minds, forgot everything at sight of what lay back of them.

The jar of blazing six-guns had caused part of the cave roof to fall in. Huge blocks of stalactites had avalanched to the floor. They shut off the passage out of this room as effectively as if half a mountain had slipped over the entrance. Every man in the chamber was caught, entombed; they were as helpless to escape as toads in the bottom of a well.

"We're trapped!" Hollister gasped. "Trapped as snug as deer in a deadfall!"

THE posse moved to the far side of the cave, away from McCairn's ledge. Hollister had a deputy bandage his wound.

Then he ordered his men, "You all hunt for another way out of this blasted cave. Look sharp!"

They poked into every nook and angle of the big chamber. But their frantic search was fruitless. When they made their report, Hollister swore long and bitterly.

"Men," he snapped, "all we can do is clear the rock away from that tunnel. It'll be one helluva job, but we got to tackle it. So come on. Forget McCairn—to blazes with him!"

For hours the posse men sweated away at that great heap of debris blocking escape from this room—heaved and lunged and staggered aside with large stone fragments. And as the long night dragged past, hunger knotted their stomachs, thirst scorched their throats, and weariness was like ground glass in their muscles.

Hollister toiled along with the rest, though his wound ached and throbbed. All through the night he urged his men on. But finally, when he judged it must be dawn in the world above, his heart sank, and he lost all hope.

His men had worn themselves out with work. Yet, their night of back-breaking toil had made no noticeable difference in that huge fall of rock. Moreover, the passage out was shut off by great blocks that weighed dozens of tons. They could be moved only by dynamite, Hollister realized.

He started suddenly as he heard his name called. Ross McCairn was shouting to him.

"Hollister," came the command, "order your men away from that rock pile. Haze 'em to the back of the cave."

"Aw, go to hell!" the deputy snarled in answer.

Ross stood up on his ledge, and flung a chunk of rock at the ceiling above Hollister's laboring partners.

That chunk broke off a dozen stalactites, loosened more of the roof material; again a hail of stone poured down, adding to that pile blocking escape from the cave.

THIS almost broke the hearts of the posse men. All the long hours of labor *wasted!* Ross could knock debris down onto that entrance faster than they could hope to clear the stuff away. Again Ross hurled a chunk at the ceiling of stalactites. This time, fragments fell onto the possemen, driving them toward the rear of the cave. And later, when the deputies tried to go back to their job of clearing a way out, Ross again drove them from their work with a shower of rock.

"It's no use," he shouted to them. "You can't dig out of this cave. I won't let you even *try* any more."

"Blast you, McCairn!" Hollister swore, almost beside himself with fury. "You led us in here on purpose!"

"Right you are."

"You trapped us!"

"Right you are."

"You'll kill us same as if you murdered us with a dynamite bomb!"

"Right you are."

"But damn you to hell, you'll die along with us—you're buried along with us!"

"Now you're wrong, Hollister. There's a way out of here, for *me*."

Hearing this, Hollister sat as if stunned for a moment, hardly able to credit his ears. Then, hope vibrant in his voice, he demanded, "You say there *is* a way out of here for you?"

"That's what I said, Hollister."

"You'd escape yourself, McCairn, an' leave us all here to die like rats?"

"I sure would, knowin' that tonight you all planned to lynch my partner, Phil Baird!"

"Well," Hollister said uneasily, "he had it comin' to him."

" You lie like stinkin' fish! Phil Baird's innocent of the killin' you're blaming on him, an' I bet a farm you *know* that. With you all out of town tonight, he didn't get lynched. With you all out of town for keeps, there won't be any evidence pushed against him, an' he'll go free."

"G-good gosh!" Hollister stuttered, a note of terror in his voice. "Are you goin' to make sure we stay out of town for keeps?"

"That's the size of it," Ross answered. "What's more, Mister Deputy, I'm in something of a rush. I don't intend to wait here until you all starve to death. So I'm givin' you a choice: either you all jump down that well at the back of this cave, or I'll avalanche half a mountain onto you."

As he finished, Ross heaved another rock into the long, lance-like stalactites hanging over the posse's heads. Fragments hurtled down onto the deputies. Yelling, swearing with pain and rage, they ran back. Again, and again Ross showered them with rock that bruised and battered. Remorselessly he drove them toward the rear of the cave, closer and closer to that deep chasm there. Until, finally, the deputies stood on the very brink of that deep pit. Into it they would plunge if they took another step back.

HOLLISTER looked down into the black depths of that abyss, felt a chill mist on his face, heard the rush and heave of surging waters. And his heart tightened as he realized that if he fell into this chasm, he would be tossed and battered by those mad whirlpools below. Even if he could keep afloat, by no manner of means could he ever be drawn back up here again.

"McCairn! McCairn!" he yelled hoarsely. "Stop drivin' us! I want to talk to you."

"What you got to say?" Ross demanded.

"Listen, man! You said you can escape from here. If we promise not to lynch Phil Baird, will you let us out of this cave?"

"No."

"McCairn, we'll forget the evidence against your partner. Baird will go free. Will you let us out of here?"

"No. You might change your mind about Baird. If you're dead, he's safe."

For a moment Hollister said nothing. Then, a hopeless panicky note in his voice, he shouted, "McCairn, we'll free Baird an' *prove* he's innocent, so that he couldn't be jailed again even if we did want to do it. He didn't do the shootin' he was locked up for—*I* did it. I put the blame on him to cover my own tracks. These deputies with me had nothin' to do with that deal. I'll make a confession that'll clear Baird for keeps. So let us out of here!"

"Give me the lowdown on that job," Ross ordered.

Hollister explained. "McCairn, a gang of holdup have been workin' this country for about a year. That gang's made up of myself an' a couple Mexicans. We've never been caught, nor even suspected, because I always led the posse goin' to investigate a holdup —an' led that posse wrong. Yesterday, we shot an' robbed a hombre. I dropped a letter an' a gun I stole from Baird on the spot of the holdup, to put the blame on him. . . . Now, will you let us out of here?"

But again Ross refused.

"No. If you all crawl out of this hole, you'll always keep lookin' for me. Someday you might catch me—an' stretch my neck or ship me back to jail. I broke out of prison an' I don't hanker to go back."

"But listen, McCairn!" Hollister shouted, in desperation. "Listen, man! I'll tell things that'll put *you* right with the law, too. You let us out of here,

an' I'll fix it so you won't have to go back to jail. Is it a bargain?"

"It is!" Ross whipped back.

"All right, then," Hollister said. Slowly, huskily, he revealed his crime. "Six years ago, McCairn, you booted me off your ranch for slappin' my own iron onto a calf of yours. I swore I'd get even with you an' everybody connected with you. One night, I stole a dozen Y Bar steers, shot a greaser waddy, an' left evidence that convicted you. *I framed you.* I'm confessin' to that now—these hombres are witnesses. You can go back to Tres Pinos an' get a pardon. . . . Now show us a way out of this damn' trap!"

ROSS wanted to yell in his joy, to leap into the air and kick his heels, to shake hands with every shaggy angel of good luck that ever watched over him. Aloud, though, he said not a word. Grabbing up that satchel of money stolen from the bank, holding his six-gun in the other hand, he stalked down the ledge to the floor of the cave.

A dozen paces from the posse men he stopped.

"Pile your torches in a heap on the ground," he snapped. "Now throw your six-guns into that dark hole back of you, *pronto!*"

Beaten, dispirited, the deputies stood at the brink of that chasm and tossed their weapons into it. Half a dozen faint splashes came up from that rush of water.

Ross walked closer to the men.

"Hollister," he said, his words hard and distinct as bullets dropping into a pan, "you led these riders after me to get back this satchel of money. All right. . . ."

He paused, and heaved that leather case down into the deep crevasse.

"Now," Ross whipped out, "Hollister, for what you've done to me an' my partner, *you dive after that money.* Jump, damn you! Jump!"

For an instant the posse was too aghast, too stunned by this order to move or object. Then suddenly they blurted out protests, argued, pleaded, swore, threatened.

"You double-crosser!" yelled Red Conway. "You said you'd lead us out of here!"

Ross answered, "I will. But Hollister is too low-down to herd with the rest of us. If he breaks his neck now, the law won't have to hang him. . . . Jump, Hollister!"

"Don't do it, Gary!" Murdock yelled. "Damn you, McCairn, you change that order, or we'll——"

"We'll what?" Ross demanded. "Hollister, you do a swan dive into that pit, or I'll knock you into it with a bullet!"

At this, Jud Leigh shouted, "Man, let's gang-jump him! He's only one against seven of us!" And he lunged forward toward Ross.

That six-gun in Ross's hand spurted fire. Leigh hadn't taken one step when the heavy bullet struck him in the thigh, dropped him, sent him over the edge of that black chasm. A shrill cry re-echoed in the pit, a splash—and then the cave vibrated to the shattering boom of rock fragments dropping from the ceiling again, loosened by the gun report.

The men stood tense, panicky, in a cold sweat of terror; but the falling rock did not touch them. Silence, tense and heavy, again settled in the cave.

Into that taut quiet, Hollister's voice rang clear and full-toned, somehow clean, somehow without a taint of fear or malice.

"McCairn, I'm damn' sorry you piled Leigh. Let's not have any more shootin'. I'm goin'."

And before his men could object again, or reach out a hand to hold him, Hollister turned and leaped, jumped down into that black abyss. Again came a splash, far below . . . then only the moaning of water, the whistle of wind along the top of swirling currents.

"Men," Ross announced, his voice metallic, "I'll lead you all out of here if you obey orders. Remember, I got a six-gun in my hand. Tie your banddannas over your eyes, *pronto!*"

"What for?" Conway asked suspiciously.

"I don't want you all to discover the way out of here. That's *my* secret. So wrap your neckerchiefs over your faces, quick!"

Presently all had covered their eyes.

Ross lined up the deputies in single file, put each man's right hand on the shoulder of the man in front of him. Ross took the elbow of the leader. Then

around the cave he led the posse, confusing them.

And unknown to the deputies, he turned them *back toward the deep chasm,* walking at a fast pace, headed straight for the edge. On, on—and over the brink went the first three men.

Anguished yells re-echoed in the pit, then a succession of splashes. . .

The last two deputies halted just in time.

They yanked bandannas from their eyes. Horror-stricken they looked into the black gulf at their feet. Then together, with the swiftness of desperation, they lunged at Ross.

"You black-hearted double-crossin' wolf!" Conway yelled. "We'll kill you if it's the last thing we do!"

Ross holstered his pistol and came to meet them. His left hand came up in a terrific smash to Conway's jaw that knocked the deputy backward, over the chasm edge, down into the pit.

Ross whirled on Murdock then; too late, however, to ward off a vicious left to the heart, and a right to the head that rocked him to his toes. He clinched with Murdock. Locked in a wrestle, they fought desperately on the brink of the pit.

Ross tore his right arm free of Murdock's clutch, and swung at the latter's head with his pistol barrel. Murdock stiffened, quivered from the agony of that blow.

"Damn you, McCairn!" he muttered dazedly. "I'm licked—but you're goin' to hell with me!"

Using the last of his strength, Murdock lunged over the brink of that chasm, his arms knotted tight about Ross. Together they fell, hurtled downward through space, wind shrill in their ears.

THEY struck cold water with a jar that wrenched them loose from each other. The current caught them, heaved them along, swept them along in a rushing whirl, helpless as corks in a mill race. Ross was aware of inky blackness, of terrific speed, of rolling over and over, of a thousand pressures that hammered at him, of a ball of pain within his chest that swelled and burst into darts of agony that shot through his body.

Then suddenly he was flung out into dazzling white light, into glaring sunshine, into a wide river pool bordered with sandy flats. Here the current slackened up. His feet touched bottom. A hand grasped his, and a voice yelled encouragement in his ear.

Ross was pulled up onto the bank. Lying flat, he rested and filled his lungs with air.

When he sat up and looked around, he saw Conway and Leigh and Murdock, all the deputies but Hollister, sitting on the shore. They were wringing water from their shirts, and grinning happily.

Conway told him, "We're all safe an' sound, McCairn. All here—but Hollister, an' he's over in the shallows, fishin' for something. . . . Hombre, why didn't you tell us that pit was the back door to the cave?"

"Would you have believed that, comin' from *me?*" Ross countered.

Conway reflected, then shook his head.

"I guess not, McCairn. We'd have thought you were tryin' to trick us into drownin' ourselves. Say, maybe you can tell us what caused that queer music we heard in the cave?"

"Sure. I was playin' a hymn by beatin' on organ stalactites with my gun barrel."

A shout back of him caused Ross to turn.

Hollister was approaching. His face was pale and drawn from the pain of his wound. Yet he strode along like a giant, holding something aloft.

This something he laid at Ross's feet.

Gravely he remarked, "McCairn, you sent me divin' after that satchel of money you stole. Here it is."

BACK in Tres Pinos, Hollister made a full confession of his crimes to Sheriff Neile. The latter assured Ross that he would be pardoned; until his pardon came, he could go free on parole.

"An' now, McCairn," the sheriff suggested, "let's go into the next room. Phil Baird's in there, sort of lookin' after that man Hollister held up an' wounded yesterday."

Not only Phil, but Nancy Baird was there, too. At sight of Ross they rushed on him, greeted him like a conquering hero. Nancy kissed him, and Phil

pumped at his arm until it ached.

"Easy, there!" he laughed. "You'll wear me out."

Then he saw the stranger Hollister had wounded, and Ross's laugh died abruptly.

"Tex Sanchez!" he gasped. "Good gosh, man! I thought you were in Mexico twenty-four hours ago?"

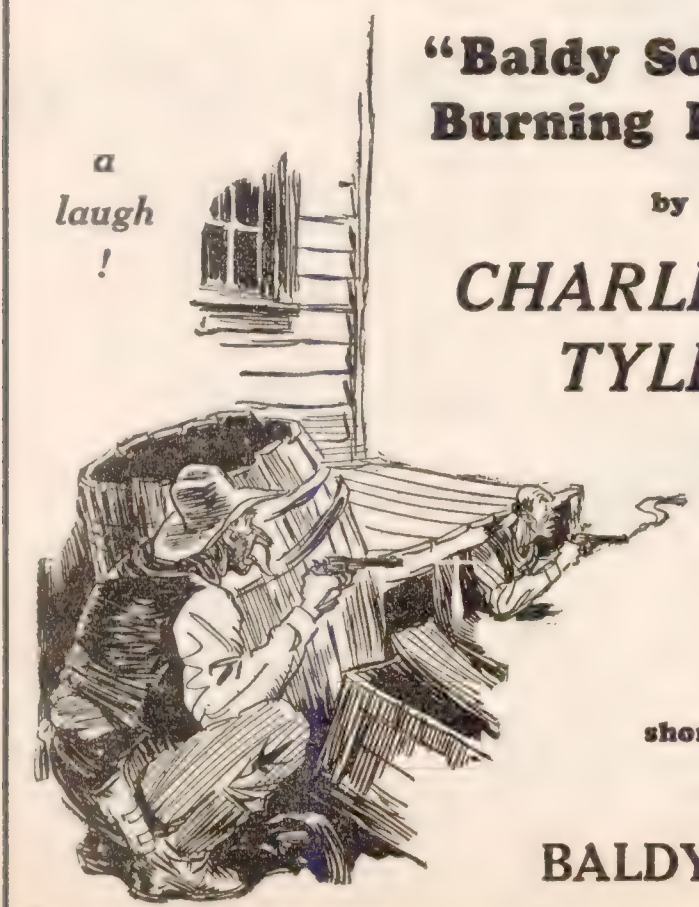
"Yeah," Sanchez grinned wanly, "that's the way I figured, too. But my sure-fire plan didn't take any holdups into account. Three masked roadagents jumped me, shot lead under my hide, an' left me for dead. It's a good thing you didn't join me in Wolf Gap like you intended to, Ross. We'd have been ambushed together. You would've been killed, or wounded so bad you never could have got away to Mexico. It would have been jail or curtains for you. Old-timer, you look lucky. Tell me what's happened."

Ross told how he had robbed the bank to lure the posse from town—the whole story.

"Smoke of smokes!" Sheriff Neile grunted, amazed, when Ross finished. "McCairn, you committed dang near every crime on the books, an' you deserve bein' hung a couple times over! But instead, you'll get a pardon, an' the satisfaction of knowin' you saved your partner's life an' busted up a gang of roadagents I couldn't squash. You surelee gave *me* a helpin' hand—in the shape of a hard fist."

"Uh-huh," Ross grinned. "Sometimes breakin' the law is the best way to enforce it."

IN NEXT WEST



a laugh !

"Baldy Sours and Burning Brands"

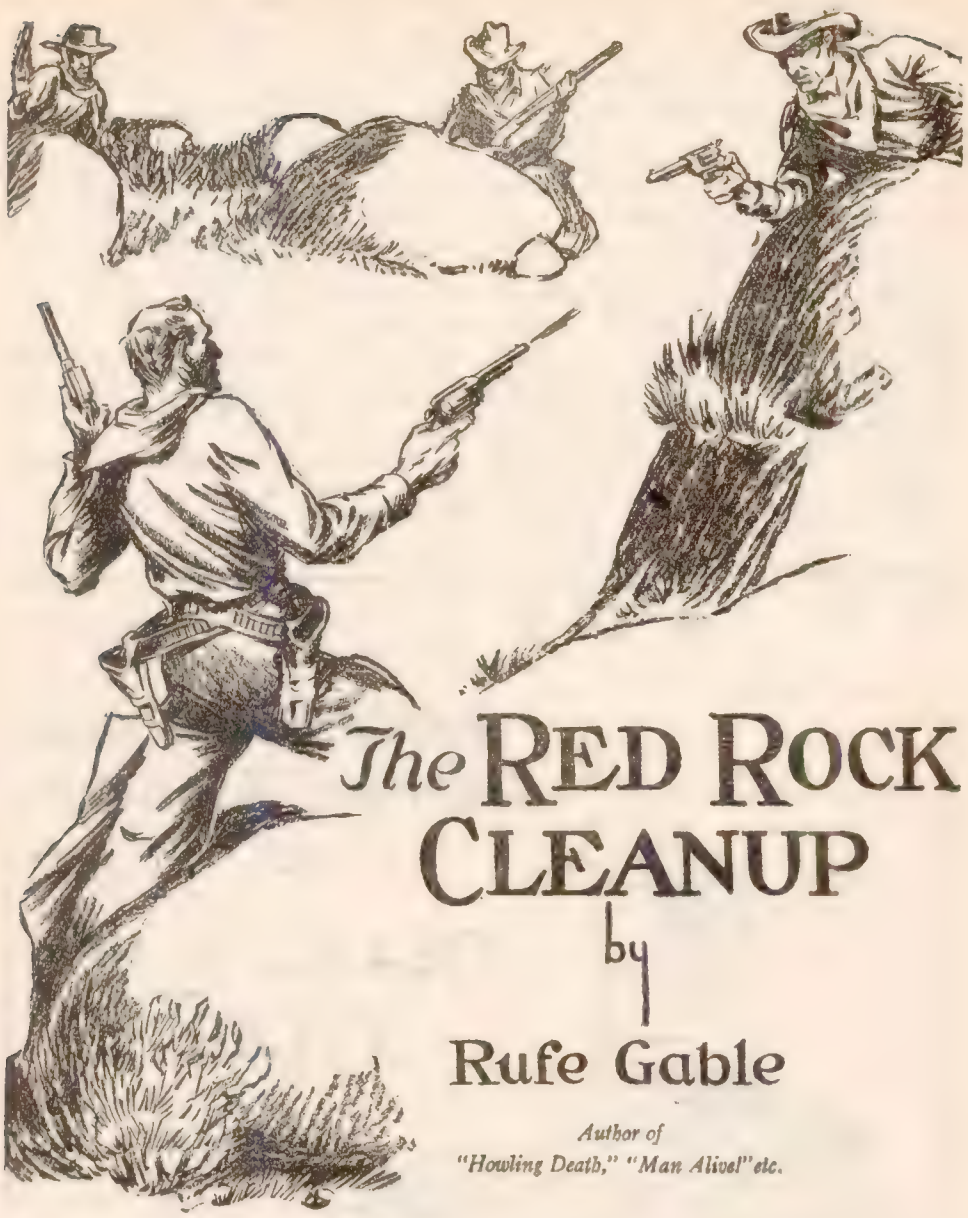
by

CHARLES W. TYLER

a short story of

BALDY SOURS

Attack and counter-attack in cowboy style!



The RED ROCK CLEANUP

by

Rufe Gable

Author of
"Howling Death," "Man Alive!" etc.

HIGH noon, and as hot as the kitchen of hades. The desert shimmered with heat waves, and the little cowtown of Red Rock, a mere blot of drab buildings upon the sun-baked face of the mesa, looked to be totally lifeless as young Bill "Buck" Buckle rode down the deserted, scorching main street.

Both horse and rider were heavily streaked with the sweaty dust of desert travel. But neither the leggy dun nor the slender, light-riding youth showed signs of fatigue.

Buck tossed his reins over the hitching rack in front of the Payday Paradise, leading drink emporium of Red Rock, hitched up his gun-belt as he swung to the ground, then with a final glance up and down the lifeless street, strode inside. His keen blue eyes searched the place as he stepped past the door. At this hour the Payday Paradise should be vibrating with the tread and

boasting of a small army of refugees from the heat. But in addition to the bartender only two men met Buck's eye. The two, evidently punchers, lounged lazily at a table.

A faint flicker of recognition gleamed in Buck's eyes at sight of the punchers. He was aware, too, that one of them straightened up with a start and was glaring at him in a surprised, mystified sort of way. Buck slid a coin across the bar, and with a mild beverage washed from his throat the dust of thirty desert miles traveled since morning. Then he directed his first conversation at the bartender.

"Small-pox epidemic or a gold stampede sweep this commercial center free of all population, which?" he asked.

"Man-hunt," replied the florid drink-dispenser out of his narrow slit of a mouth.

"Int'ristin'," replied Buck. "And the hunted jasper must be a plumb pernicious sort of a hombre, takin' the whole population this away to round him up."

Red Face shrugged a corpulent shoulder.

"Slim Murphy," he replied. "Plugged Moonface Horn who was ridin' fer Cook Massey. Cook and the rest of the boys is a right smart peeved. Two posses, one under Massey and one under Sheriff Walls, is swore to bring him in. Reckon they'll be back most any time now."

Buck slapped another coin upon the bar, and included the two listening punchers with a sweep of his hand.

"Drink for ever'body," he called. "Step right up, gents, and get your pizen."

Quick glances passed between the two punchers but they came clumping to the bar with apparent readiness; both slyly eyeing Buck as they did so. As the bottle traveled, Buck mused aloud as though impressed by the thought.

"And two posses is trailin' Slim Murphy for pluggin' Moonface Horn."

"And they'll git him, don't doubt it, pardner," asserted the bartender.

"Gents," said Buck solemnly as he raised his glass, "here's to the luck of Slim Murphy. May his horse be swift and his gun arm steady. Any jasper that plugged Moonface Horn deserves the best."

THERE was a deathly, gripping silence broken only by the clash of glasses returned untouched to the bar. One of the punchers, the one with straw-colored hair and flaming complexion, edged toward Buck, tense, bristling, hands outspread just above the butt of his two low hanging six-guns.

"Say, jasper, are you plumb sure you ain't got your cases mixed?" he demanded in a shrill threatening voice. "What do you know about Moonface Horn?"

Buck eyed the puncher a moment with cold defiance in his eye. He was but a boy, just barely out of the awkward, overgrown stage of his development; but he carried the assurance and coolness of a veteran.

"I happen to know that he was one of Cook Massey's pet killers," he replied watching his questioner narrowly. "Along with some other skunks—includin' Whitey Moss."

A snort burst from the puncher. Mixed astonishment and rage seemed momentarily to paralyze him; then with a bitter oath he grabbed at his gun. His name was Whitey Moss.

That draw was never completed. With scarcely a visible movement of his right hand, Buck conjured a six-shooter from his holster, and Whitey Moss's hands went toward the ceiling as he gazed into the muzzle. His companion, almost directly behind him, followed his example with commendable alacrity.

"Say," Whitey blurted, "what you mean by pullin' a gun on me?"

"Whitey," replied Buck through tight lips, "we'll get down to cases. I knowed you the minute I set eyes on you, and you knowed me even if I have changed some the past three years. You know what I come here for—I'm lookin' for Cook Massey. I ain't huntin' trouble with you nor any other one of Massey's paid killers—it's Cook Massey himself I'm trailin'. You go tell him I'm waitin' for him in Red Rock—and to start shootin' when he sees me."

A defiant sneer slowly formed on Whitey Moss's tobacco-stained lips.

"Ratin' yourself plenty high, ain't you kid? Cook'll sure be glad to sink a few slugs in your carcass, you tin-horn gunfanner."

The muzzle of Buck's gun wrung a grunt from Whitey as it bored into the puncher's stomach.

"Get goin'."

There was a menace in that tone that started Whitey on his way. Short Buchanan, Whitey's companion, fell in step behind him as they marched sullenly out the door under cover of Buck's gun. Buck watched them mount and ride toward the west; then he turned back to meet the wide-eyed, stupefied gaze of the bartender.

"You're honest to Gawd Bill Buckle?" the fellow asked uncertainly.

"In person," Buck replied.

The bartender studied him blankly for a moment.

"All I know is that when Cook Massey gits word you're a-waitin' here fer him, he's a-goin' to come with guns a-blazin'."

"That's why I sent word by Whitey," Buck replied.

The bartender, of course, did not know that for three years young Bill Buckle had been counting days until the time that he could meet Cook Massey face to face with blazing guns. And now that the time had come, Buck considered that there was no need of secrecy. He had not intended to broadcast his identity and purpose in Red Rock this way; but after Whitey had identified him, he knew that his best course was to force the issue. His challenge would bring Massey, for Massey had a reputation to uphold.

THREE years before, when young Buck had been a gangling, overgrown kid of fifteen, Cook Massey had just begun to blight the Red Rock country with the activities of his rustlers and gunmen. Since that time Cook had forced out a score or more of little ranchers, he virtually owned the town of Red Rock, controlled most of the range, and dictated to the local political machine. Old Nick Buckle, Buck's father, because he was the strongest opponent to Massey domination, had been first to be eliminated. With his own eyes young Buck had seen Massey shoot old Nick through the heart that night that Massey and his cut-throat bunch had raided the Circle Cross ranch. Young Bill Buckle himself had ridden to safety through a hail of bullets and plunged his horse into the swollen Wild Cat Creek to escape a trap. The horse was drowned, but Buck caught a low-hanging willow, pulled himself to safety, and escaped in the darkness.

And now for three years he had prepared himself for the vengeance trail. For three years he had whipped himself into shape while he grew from an awkward youngster into a slender, wiry youth with whipcord muscles and iron nerves. Every day for three years he had practiced speed and accuracy with two six-shooters, painstakingly, grimly, with the one purpose of making Massey pay in the way that old Nick Buckle would have made him pay had their conditions been reversed. And now at eighteen, a boy in years and appearance, but a veteran in craft and purpose, and with a gun speed like the dart of a rattler's head, Buck had come to get Cook Massey.

BUCK sauntered out in front of the Payday Paradise, impatient for action now that the time had come. But that action was going to be delayed, now that Massey was leading a posse on the trail of Slim Murphy. Impatience grew in Buck's bosom. The foul, depressing atmosphere of the Payday oppressed him. He crossed the street to an eating house and ate a spare lunch, all the time conscious of the sly, suspicious glances of the proprietor. He saw men entering and leaving the Payday now. Word was getting noised about that Bill Buckle, reported dead, had come back and had come gunning for Cook Massey. The whole town was a pest-hole of Massey men.

Buck left the lunch counter, swung into the saddle and rode westward. His purpose was two-fold, to escape the obnoxious atmosphere of the cowtown, and to leave the Massey tools guessing about his whereabouts and intentions. The less they knew about them the better.

Four miles out of Red Rock he struck the base of Saw Tooth Mountain, the first of a series of far-flung hills that bordered the mesa. As he rode Buck had formed a plan. He would take a station up on the Saw Tooth overlooking the trail. He could see when the posse rode in; and he could time his own appearance in Red Rock.

The trail wound its serpentine way along the base of the mountain, gradually ascending toward the shallow cut where it crossed into the valley beyond.

As Buck rode through a short, narrow gorge, a lariat rope from behind cut the air, jerked tight around his shoulders, and the earth seemed to bounce up to meet him. Buck was next aware that he was stretched on his back beside the trail with his hands tied, and that Whitey Moss was ripping his shirt open from the collar downward.

"Sure it's him, Snort," Whitey was snarling. "See them scars? I was ridin' fer the Circle Cross when a bronc throwed the kid plumb down a span of barb wire fence and like to cut him in two. I knowed him all the time, and them scars proves it."

"I reckon they do," agreed Snort. "But what we goin' do with him?"

"Hold him down to the ranch till Cook comes in. Wouldn't s'prise me none if Cook ain't got papers he'd like to make this kid sign. He's allus figgered he was dead, you know."

Buck sat up. His head was in a whirl and throbbed wildly from the contact with the rocky trail. At the moment he could not have argued with Whitey that he was alive. But he managed to face Whitey Moss with a sneer of genuine contempt.

"Still a snake in the grass for Massey, I see, Whitey," he declared bitingly. Whitey flashed crimson with anger.

"Fer two bits I'd sink a slug in your gizzard," he snarled. "I don't let no man call me a snake."

"Go easy, Whitey," Snort warned. "Gotta let Cook handle this case."

"I know it," Whitey snorted angrily. "That's why I can't do nuthin'. Bring on them horses, Snort."

WORDS of hot derision tugged at Buck's lips, but he checked their utterence. It would do no good to quarrel with Whitey Moss. His one hope lay in escaping before Massey got hold of him. For Massey, of course, realized that Buck was the legal heir of old Nick Buckle and was a menace to Massey's hold upon the old Circle Cross ranch as well as a danger to Massey's life. For the boy, being an eye-witness of the murder of old Nick Buckle might, with the proper backing, put hemp around Cook Massey's neck. Those were two good reasons that Massey would be careful to see that Buck never left his clutches alive.

A bitter sense of defeat gripped Buck as Whitey and Snort tied him into his saddle, not because of the danger to himself, but because he had failed in his mission. Perhaps he had been too self-confident, and old Sam Mounds had been right after all. Buck had worked for Sam the past three years on the Hammer Head ranch two hundred miles north. Sam had been openly skeptical of a mere boy's ability to ride into Massey's stronghold and accomplish his purpose.

"Son," he had advised paternally, "Arizony's got her laws and her law-enforcin' officers. You seen enough to stretch Cook Massey's neck. I'll back you gettin' the law int'risted."

But the law of the old West was bred into Buck's blood. The debt would not be settled until he settled it in the way that Nick Buckle would have settled it.

"Thanks, Sam," he had said slowly and firmly, carefully weighing and rejecting the generous offer. "But I reckon it's my job to settle with Massey." And later he had added, "After I rid the earth of Massey, I aim to round up a bunch of them little ranchers he scared out and go back into the Red Rock range and clean up the whole killin', robbin' nest. A Buckle is goin' to run the Circle Cross again, Sam."

But as Whitey started riding up trail with Buck following and Snort trailing behind, Buck realized that his chances of accomplishing his purposes were extremely slender. They had gone not more than a hundred yards when Whitey suddenly jerked his horse to its haunches. A stranger had stepped from the brush beside the road, and his keen gray eyes were flashing at them over the end of a pair of steady six-shooters. Whitey's hands shot up. Snort quickly followed suit.

"Hell, it's Slim Murphy!" Whitey gasped.

"Whitey, you're plumb observant," declared Slim Murphy dryly, as he approached with quick, light steps. "A nice little joke you played, a-ropin' and tyin' up a plumb harmless rider."

Buck looked at the young stranger with sudden intense interest. This was Slim Murphy who had killed Moonface Horn, and who was supposed to be fleeing before two groups of possemen far back in the mountains. There was something bewildering about his sud-

den, unexplained, and utterly calm appearance there in the trail. Whitey was totally upset.

"The blamed, dad-burned skunk pulled a gun on me," he rasped.

"The only mistake he made there was not pullin' the trigger," returned Slim Murphy. Then he stepped forward, quickly lifted Whitey's and Snort's guns, rescued Buck's two six-shooters from Whitey's saddle bag, and with his knife clipped the rope that bound Buck, all with a quickness and sureness of movement that stamped him a genuine son of the range. Buck watched him with a rapidly growing admiration. Whitey gasped in consternation.

"Slim, how in the name o' Pete did you git back here?"

"Didn't come back, Whitey," Slim returned with a defiant grin. "Ain't never flew my kite yet. Crawl down off that bronc. I'm puttin' you two jaspers afoot."

IN TWO minutes Slim had bound Whitey's and Snort's hands behind them. He sent their horses racing down the trail with two slaps of his hat; and then with a deftly placed kick in the seats of their respective pants he started Snort and Whitey running awkwardly after them. Buck stretched out an eager hand to his rescuer.

"Holy centipedes, Slim Murphy, you're a plumb fast and purty worker!" he declared in open admiration.

"The fun's all mine," grinned Slim Murphy. "Them jaspers and a bunch more like 'em hereabouts gives me a pain in the neck. From what I hear, you must be old Nick Buckle's boy."

"You got my number, pard. And I heard about you over in Red Rock. How come you didn't dig out after you locked horns with Moonface?"

"I had some unfinished business which detained me, so to speak. I high-tailed it up into the hills a ways and laid low till after the posse rode out, after which I found a open field for the transaction of business. I'm ridin' now, and ridin' fast; and I'd advise you to go along."

"How about my unfinished business?"

"Mebbe we can get you some backin'. Reckon you're here to settle with Massey. But take it from me, after you plug that hombre, you'll find half a dozen of these tools of his fannin' guns in your face."

"I'm out to get Massey," Buck returned firmly. "Reckon I thank you a heap for what you've done, Slim, and fer offerin' to get me backin'. But it's my debt. I aim to settle it."

Slim Murphy studied the boy's lean, resolute face a moment. He saw that it was useless to argue the point.

"Reckon you've got your mind made up," he said slowly. "And I'm wishin' you luck, Buckle. See you later."

Slim disappeared into the brush and a moment later emerged astride a powerful roan gelding. With a final wave of his hand he turned swiftly up the trail.

"Well I'll be everlastin' hornswaggled!" Buck ejaculated. "Reckon he's been hidin' right here on the Saw Tooth while that posse was a beatin' the brush further back. Must 'a' seen Whitey and Snort layin' for me as he was ridin' the ridge. In more ways than one he seems to be a seldom kind of a jasper. I don't mind tyin' up with his kind."

BUCK followed the trail a quarter of a mile, then turned sharply up the side of the ridge, following a dim cattle trail that led to the top. From the top of the ridge he could keep a watchful eye upon the mesa below and thus know when the posse under Massey returned to Red Rock. But half way to the top of the ridge he jerked his horse to a sudden stop at the sound of a blast of rifle shots coming from the other side of the ridge.

Those shots meant a battle. A sudden fearful suspicion gripped Buck. He jabbed home the spurs, driving his horse with all possible speed up the steep grade. A hundred yards from the top the climb became too steep for a horse. Hastily tying his animal in the shelter of some brush covered boulders, Buck jerked his rifle from the saddle boot and started climbing on foot. Peering over a rock ledge at the top he took in the whole situation at a glance. It was just what he had feared. Slim Murphy had ridden into one of the posses. Slim was now behind a pile of boulders on top of the ridge a hundred yards to the west of Buck, and he was pumping his Winchester with deadly precision, holding at bay a dozen men or more who had formed in the line of a rough semicircle on the hillside below. There was

nothing puzzling about what had happened. When Slim rode out of the gorge he had ridden into the posse which evidently was returning. Caught in a sharp bend of the trail on the other side of the ridge, with his flight cut off, Slim had deserted his horse and had climbed the ridge where he was standing the posse off. But Slim was in a death trap; Buck knew that. If he retreated farther, riders would soon circle the ridge through the trail cut and ride him down in the mesa below. His only chance was to fight; and numbers were against him overwhelmingly.

Buck's eyes shot fire. He liked the free-and-easy, jovial, cool, and deadly Slim Murphy. He owed it to Slim to help. He threw his rifle to his cheek, and an unsuspecting posseman, hidden from Slim but visible to Buck, came in the sights. But slowly he lowered the weapon unfired. He could not mix in this fight. Regardless of his obligation to Slim he could not do it. A moan arose and died on Buck's lips at the realization; a burning sense of shame flushed his cheeks beneath the tan at the thought that he, Bill Buckle, should quit a partner in trouble like this.

It was not that Slim Murphy was a killer outlaw, nor that the men closing in on him represented the law. As Buck viewed it, Slim had done a commendable thing in killing Moonface, and the posse were Massey tools, representing not the state, but the law of greed, plunder and murder that had marked Massey's leadership for the past three years. Buck had no scruples against fighting the bunch. It was the responsibility of his own mission in Red Rock that caused him to hesitate. He had come to assess justice from Cook Massey. If he did not do it, nobody would. His father's murder would go unavenged, the score of little ranchers who had been robbed and driven out of the Red Rock range would find no justice. For three years Buck had been preparing for this job. He had vowed that nothing except Massey's death would stop him. And if he plunged into this fight with Slim Murphy he would never live to settle with Cook Massey. For numbers would tell. The posse could wear them out if assault failed. He and Slim would have not a chance. A stab that was worse than and physical pain distorted Buck's lean face.

"Gawd!" he moaned. "And here he's a fightin' them very devils I'd give the very world to clean up!"

THEN suddenly Buck stiffened. Straight down the top of the ridge a hundred yards the other side of Slim a stealthy figure wormed its way to the shelter of a brush-covered boulder. One of the possemen had swung far to the right, and keeping under cover had reached the top from which place he could take the unsuspecting Slim broadside. A rifle barrel appeared over that boulder, then a cautious head. Buck suddenly saw red. His rifle butt flew to his cheek with a savage jerk. His rifle spoke. It was a long shot at a difficult target, but the distant figure jerked, swayed an instant, then slumped from sight.

Slim Murphy whirled at the sound of the gun, his smoking rifle swinging squarely upon Buck. Buck threw up one hand.

"Easy on that, pard," he called. "You ain't none too popular in these parts nohow. Don't be bumpin' off the one friend you got."

Buck bent low behind the ledge that capped the ridge and soon fell in beside Slim who eyed him disapprovingly as he rammed fresh shells into his magazine.

"Say, Buck," he warned, "this ain't no Fourth-of-July sham-battle you're hornin' into. Skip down that hill and ride 'fore they cut you off."

"Figger on hoggin' all the fun yourself?" Buck demanded with mock sarcasm as he poked his rifle barrel through the protecting screen of brush.

"Yeah, and I don't aim to have it spoiled by gettin' somebody else shot up. Get goin', I tell you."

Buck's answer was the crash of his rifle as he spotted an unwary posseman sneaking higher up the hillside. Then he spoke without taking his eyes off the circle of rifle smoke puffs below.

"Castin' my mind back over the Buckle hist'ry," he said, "I don't seem to strike on a one that ever rode off and left a friend in trouble."

"All right, Buck," agreed Slim, seeing that he could not change the youth's decision. "I reckon between us we'll show these skunks a warm time."

There was a brief pause in the firing below. Far down the side of the hill Buck could see three or four men

grouped together in consultation. They scattered. And then a few minutes later the firing broke out with renewed fury, while the wings of the attacking circle crept higher.

Hugging the protecting rim of rock, Buck put his rifle into deadly operation. On the right wing he caught the leading man as he darted from one boulder to another. The fellow sprawled and rolled grotesquely down the hill. He sent a second man diving into the brush with one arm swinging limp and useless. But at the same time a hail of hot lead was sweeping the stronghold of the two fighters. Bullets whined and hissed, they chipped off little particles of stone with accompanying spurts of dust; and one lead missile found its way through the clump of boulders and tugged at Buck's shirt. The crash of rifles was almost an unbroken roar. Buck grinned grimly.

"Holy jumpin' t'rantlers," he rasped, "them buzzards is sure out for your gizzard, Slim."

"So far we're givin' 'em a run for their money, pard," Slim replied.

FOR several minutes the battle continued with unabated fury. Slowly the attackers closed in. Buck sent two more men sprawling down the hillside, and he judged that Slim was equally as successful. But even at that, Slim knew that numbers would win in the long run. Soon or later one of those rascals would reach the top, and from some place of hiding he would pick off both Slim and Buck, perhaps without even being discovered. But until that happened there would be singing lead upon the ridge called Saw Tooth.

A rifle sounded above the roar, high up on their left. A gasp of pain burst from Slim's lips. Buck turned like a flash, his rifle instinctively lining on the little puff of smoke near the spot where he had got his first man. Behind the smoke the head and shoulders of a man protruded above a boulder as he hunted for Buck in his sights. Both guns spoke, Buck's an instant the quicker. The impact of the bullet destroyed the fellow's aim. His bullet hissed a vicious note in Buck's ear and buried itself in the rock ledge behind, while the would-be killer sprawled face-downward across his protecting rock.

Slim was tearing at his shirt. The bullet had struck too high to be fatal, but it had neatly bored through his shoulder blade and had ruined the use of the left arm for days to come. Buck quickly shucked off his own shirt and ripped it into bandages. A few tight turns and he had checked the blood flow.

"I ain't out yet, pard," Slim rasped grimly. "I can still give 'em hot medicine with a six-gun."

"Keep low," Buck warned; "and watch that bunch of boulders over to the left. That makes twice they've come near endin' this celebration from there."

Buck peered over the ledge again, and his eyes suddenly became blazing slits while his lips clamped to a straight, hard line. Evidently emboldened by the slackening of gun fire from the ridge top, a man had risen above a protruding shelf below and was intently studying the stronghold of the wanted Slim. That man was Cook Massey!

Buck's rifle snapped to his cheek. With Massey in the sights, his finger tightened on the trigger. But he suddenly jerked the weapon down like it were hot. He couldn't collect from Massey that way! Massey must know that he, Bill Buckle, was the avenger. He must know that he was being made to pay for old Nick Buckle's death. He must come face to face with hot lead with that understanding in mind. Buck had come here for that purpose. Guns and posse and sheriff couldn't stop him.

ANOTHER figure loomed up beside Massey. Buck recognized it, and the fire in his eyes blazed with added intensity. He turned to the wounded Slim.

"Slim," he demanded, "are you good for a bit longer; twenty minutes, mebbe?"

"Me?" Slim snorted. "No one hole in the left wing is goin' stop me."

"Cook Massey is down there," Buck continued fiercely. "Him and Sheriff Walls both. Them posses has met and come back together, and we're fightin' both of 'em. But I'm goin' down and settle with Cook Massey man to man."

"But sainted little devils," gasped Slim, "they'll sink you so full of lead you'll jest natcherally bury yourself."

"And they sink us both if we stay here," returned Buck. "While accordin' to my scheme you get away."

"Me? I don't leave no pal in a hole like this," Slim snorted.

"You're a doin' what I tell you," rasped Buck. "I'm loadin' both rifles which you can take rest and fire, and your six, and you're a goin' to hold them devils' attention till I sneak around back of the ridge and circle 'em. I'm comin' up behind Massey and take his scalp. When me and Massey starts our little stunt we're goin' to be the big show for a few minutes. That's when you fade away. You'll find the best horse in seven states down there in that gully just west of the clump of mesquite. They won't savvy your move for a bit, and time they get their horses in the race you'll be miles in the lead with dark only two hours off."

Slim's face threatened to burst with the rush of anger, for Slim felt insulted.

"Damn you, Buck, you're ridin' yourself—not me. Fork that nag and flag. They ain't wise that you're here. I'm done. Besides it's my fight. You can settle with Massey later."

"I swore to get Massey on sight," Buck roared back at him. "And he's right down there. To hell with consequences. You ride when the time comes. I'm goin'."

Buck wormed his way out of the little shallow in which they were hidden, and when safely hidden by the top of the ridge he sprang to his feet and ran. A quarter of a mile and he crossed the top, raced down the hill side, and circled back behind the posse which still was intent upon its attack. Guns still barked and lead still whined. Slim was putting up a mighty stiff fight for a wounded, one-arm man.

Cook Massey, sprawled behind a rock ledge, was savagely pumping a winchester and cursing the doubly condemned Slim Murphy to whom alone he attributed the death of four of his followers and the wounding of several others the last half hour, when the muzzle of a six-shooter suddenly jabbed into his ribs. He whirled to face a blazing-eyed youth whose face shone with a grim light of triumph. Massey's eyes hardened as the light of recognition shot through them. They were cold gray, merciless eyes, the eyes of a killer. Massey bounded to his feet, every muscle tense, and every sense alert. For ten seconds the eyes of the two men met in fierce combat, and no words were necessary to interpret their message. Young Bill Buckle rammed his six-shooter into the holster and folded his arms across his breast with a defiant gesture. Massey's eyes shot fire as he measured this opportunity in terms of experience and gun-speed. With a bitter snarl his hand flashed down to his gun butt. But before Massey's fingers had gripped his weapon, Buck's six-gun, conjured from its holster with the speed of light, belched fire. Massey stiffened at the impact, then wilted into a limp, lifeless heap.

NOT until that instant had any of Massey's men noticed the intrusion of an enemy into their circle. But at the crash of Buck's gun, Sheriff Walls, the man nearest on the left, turned and shouted a loud warning and at the same instant whirled his smoking rifle. But Massey's body had hardly struck the ground before Buck's gun barked again, and Sheriff Walls crumbled face downward upon his unused gun. The sheriff's shout had brought every eye in that direction. Snarls and curses greeted the sight of this mysterious adversary as rifles and six-shooters swung to bear upon him. But with dazzling speed young Buck's two six-shooters became howling blasts belching almost unbroken streaks of fire. Hot lead swept the hillside with the hand of death. The three men nearest him wilted before they could over-come the reaction of surprise sufficiently to bring their guns into play. Those farther up the hillside, hesitating between the impulse to dart to cover and the demand for quick gun-work, lost their one opportunity for victory. A half dozen shots from as many guns went wild, while Buck's six-shooters swept them down like a machine gun. Three years of patient, persistence in developing gun-speed found its reward in that battle of a few seconds duration.

With their two leaders dead and death smiting their ranks, the remnant of the posse dived to cover and scattered down the valley. Slim Murphy came racing down the steep mountainside despite his useless arm.

"My Gawd, kid!" he gasped. "If you ain't hell on two legs no man ever was. You've cleaned out the bunch!"

"Thought I told you to ride," Buck accused.

A slow devilish grin crossed Slim's brown face.

"Well, you see, pard, it was jest like this. You worked so danged fast with them six-guns that I didn't have time to even get started 'fore the show was over."

But young Bill Buckle's face was serious.

"I've paid my debt, Slim," he declared grimly. "But I'm a outlaw from now on. Reckon I'll ride with you now, Slim."

Slim Murphy eyed him a moment, and then a smile of amused sympathy lighted his face. He stooped over the body of Sheriff Walls, plucked from his vest the sheriff's badge, and thrust it into his pocket.

"Never did like to see that badge on that kind of a man, dead or alive," he declared in tones mysterious. "Buck, you've done a great day's work. An outlaw the devil! Look here."

From some place beneath his belt Slim Murphy dug up an identification card—an inspector for the Cattlemen's Association. Buck's eyes popped out like electric push-buttons.

"There's where we stand, pard," declared Slim, patting Buck's back with his good hand. "I been here getting the low down on rustlin', killin' and general cussedness in Red Rock. Massey and Walls and some of the political ring had things just like they wanted them. Moonface forced that fight on me before I got all the evidence I needed to show that Walls was working with Massey in the scheme to dominate the range. But I got that dope after I side-stepped the posse, and I was just going out to send for the rangers to help me make a cleanin' when you brought your one-man army on the scene and we tangled with 'em. We won't need any rangers now."

"But some of them jaspers we plugged might be honest cowmen that Walls deputized," Buck fretted.

"Don't worry about that," declared Slim. "Neither Walls nor Massey would have a man with him that wasn't in the ring; couldn't trust a outsider. They're all killers, every one of 'em. And say, boy, if I was you I'd hump down to the Circle Cross and corral as many critters as I could find grazin' thereabouts. There's goin' to be a grand accountin' when the folks that Massey scared out of the country comes back to claim their land and critters."

"Whispering Range"

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by

ERNEST HAYCOX

it is coming in WEST

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Sept. 17-30

BAD BILL'S GOOD NAME

By Earl C. McCain

Author of "Accordin' to Colonel Colt," "The Indian Sign," etc.

Killin' comes high when a man has to bail his enemy out o' jail to get a shot at him.

SHERIFF JIM FRISBIE dropped a good poker hand and leaped to his feet as a mighty double crash shook the Bluefront, Parmint's leading bar. But he didn't hurry about reaching for his gun.

He recognized the tall, gaunt, old man in the doorway, with two huge, smoking guns in his hands, as "Bad Bill" King, last of the old-time hell-benders. And a man didn't draw carelessly on old Bill.

Both the old and new Wests were represented in the crowd that lined the bar. But that striking appearance of old Bill had silenced all of them. The old-timers, like the sheriff, may have been amazed at his audacity in showing himself there. The mere sight of him, with those glaring guns, was enough for the others.

A three days' beard decorated his lean, hard face, and his blue eyes held a look that matched the muzzles of the long, bone-handled guns. But for all his fierceness, a satisfied grin overspread his features.

It was a situation to Bill's liking; a fact made clear when he suddenly threw back his head and shouted, "Up to the bar, everybody! You're drinkin' with Bad Bill King!"

Frisbie, though new in office, was an

old-timer in that section. He had known King back in the old days, before the drop in the price of silver had robbed Parmint of her glory. Bill had been bad then, a regular rip-snorter, and age, apparently, hadn't improved him any.

The sheriff was standing near the center of the room, his star glinting from his vest, when King first noticed him. The old badman holstered his twin cannons and dropped one eyelid in a meaningful wink as he strode past to the bar.

It wasn't Frisbie's way to act hastily, nor to make arrests in a showy manner. He wanted old Bill, wanted him bad, and Bill probably knew it. But that wink had hinted that the old fellow meant no harm. Time enough to act when things began to happen, he decided.

Glancing around, the sheriff noticed Lane Savage, owner of the Forty-four ranch, watching him intently. Savage, although a comparative newcomer, had developed into a power in local politics. While he had supported Frisbie's candidacy, the sheriff didn't like him.

"Probably anxious to point out my duty to me," the officer said to himself, reading Savage's glance. But the politician's interest only made him the more determined to handle King in his own way.

The party was a flop, from Bill's viewpoint. A few strangers timidly joined him at the bar when he ordered drinks, but the old-timers hung back. The sheriff understood that, if Bill didn't. And the badman, for all his truculence, didn't try to force the issue.

AFTER a couple of drinks, old Bill turned from the bar. He found Sheriff Frisbie waiting just outside the door.

"How come you ride into town this way, Bill?" the sheriff asked quietly, keeping a watchful eye on the badman's guns. "I reckon you know I've got a warrant for your arrest."

"What!" old Bill exclaimed, rocking back on his heels abruptly. But he made no move to draw, so neither did Frisbie. Bad Bill followed his exclamation by asking, "What do you want me for, Sheriff?"

"For holding up the Gold City stage —twice—and for plugging Tom Tynon in the arm during the first holdup. You see, blood poison set in around that bullet wound, and Tynon lost his left arm at the elbow. He's the one most anxious for your arrest."

"Hell, Sheriff! You've got your cases mixed," old Bill snorted suddenly, shrugging his shoulders as though he had no time to bandy words. "I ain't been in this section for five years."

"That so?" inquired the officer mildly, though the lines about his mouth meant he wasn't through. "Where you been?"

"Down San Antone way, on my ranch. I only got here today to look after a little business. I tell you again, you're all mixed up."

"Maybe so," Frisbie drawled patiently. "But the name on the warrant is Bill King, and that's the name you just gave in the bar."

"Sure, I did. Because that *is* my name; Bad Bill King," was the angry retort. But what else he intended to say was lost when he followed the sheriff's surprised, anxious glance.

Out from the sidewalk across the dusty street had stepepd a tall, bronzed rancher; his left sleeve dangling limp from the elbow and his right hand on his holster!

It was Tom Tynon, who had sworn to kill Bad Bill King on sight. And Tynon wasn't a man who made idle threats.

"So you're Bad Bill King, eh?" Tynon snapped, moving a few steps nearer. "I been waitin' to meet you again; ever since that bullet of yourn cost me an arm!"

Tynon's square jaws were like twin slabs of granite; hard and cold. Crouching slightly forward, he barked tersely, "Now that we *have* met—reach for your guns!"

"Hold on, Tom," the sheriff hastily ordered, throwing himself in front of old Bill, with a hand on his gun. "King's my prisoner, arrested on a warrant you swore to. You'll have to let the law do this."

"The law's had three years," Tynon growled, edging sideways for a better view of King. Tynon had opposed Frisbie for sheriff in the last election, and there wasn't any great love between the two. But they had never openly clashed before.

"The law's actin' now," Frisbie shot back, watching Tynon for a hostile move. But the next move came from another quarter.

Old Bill, sidling out from behind the

sheriff, had dropped both hands toward his belt. He had shed the years like a mantle in that moment, and fine, raw courage sparkled in his fierce old eyes.

"No need to pertect me, Sheriff," he grated. "I dunno what's troublin' this feller, but he can git what he's after."

The sheriff was a big, strong man, but his long suit was quickness. And he had a brain that was quicker than his hand. He knew death hung hovering in the balance, with those men touching their guns.

"Wait!" he snapped, whirling on old Bill. And not even King, in the days of his prime, could have acted any quicker.

Frisbie's hands, off his belt now, darted between Bad Bill's outspread arms. The butts of those old guns stared up at him. One in each hand, he snatched them from the holsters. He spun on Tynon with levelled weapons as he spoke.

"Hands off your gun, Tom! And keep 'em off! King's unarmed now, and under the protection of the law!"

Tynon, seeing King's holsters empty, turned back to the sidewalk. Against an unarmed man, he could do nothing.

But old Bill was bristling like an angry bear.

"I wouldn't be unarmed, if you hadn't grabbed them guns," he snarled at the sheriff. "And I ain't got time to go to jail now. I told you I'm up here on business, and I got to see a man right away."

FRISBIE stuck old Bill's guns inside his belt and gently headed his prisoner toward the jail. He knew it took a good-sized chunk of courage to arrest old Bill any time. The old badman was a holy terror with those long-barreled guns, accurate and lightning fast. Back in the days of Parmint's wildness, he had often painted the town red. And no former sheriff had felt called upon to interfere.

Remembering Bill's last statement, the sheriff suddenly asked, "Who do you want to see, Bill? Maybe I can arrange that for you."

"Chuck Rogers, the stagedriver, if he's got in yet. I kinder thought I heard the stage drive in a while ago."

The answer surprised the sheriff so much he stopped abruptly. But he covered his surprise before he replied.

"You did. But Chuck's in no condition to talk business. He came in all likkered up, and is down in the Longhorn now, takin' on more. I doubt if he'll be able to take the stage on this afternoon."

"I got to see him anyway; before he leaves," old Bill insisted. "Why can't you let me go now, Sheriff? And I'll come back tomorrow noon. You ought to know I'm a man who keeps my word."

"That wouldn't do at all, Bill," the sheriff said thoughtfully. "Tynon's gunnin' for you, and I don't want either of you killed. Besides, I've got other reasons why I want you in jail."

Frisbie had noticed Savage, with a smile on his face, watching from the doorway of the bar. But it wasn't a desire to please the politician that inspired that last remark. Frisbie had heard Chuck Rogers' drunken remarks in the Longhorn, and didn't want old Bill to talk to Rogers before the stage left for Gold City.

Old Bill subsided gloomily as he trudged on. But inside the sheriff's office, which adjoined the jail, he made another stand.

"Looka here, Sheriff; I'll put up bond," he offered, yanking a huge roll of bills from his pocket. "Here's five hundred dollars that says I'll be back in town tomorrow noon. You ain't got no right to put a man in jail who's willin' to give bond."

"A bond would have to be approved by Judge Sames," the sheriff replied, though he halted his act of searching the prisoner. "And I've got to keep you and Tynon from shootin' up each other."

"I'll keep outa Tynon's way, if that's what's troublin' you," old Bill declared solemnly. "I'll be outa town in five or ten minutes, just as soon as I can see old Chuck."

The sheriff took a moment for thought. He didn't want old Bill loose, in view of what he feared. But neither could he refuse him the chance to offer bond. That might prove a mistake his political enemies could use to advantage.

He handed old Bill's guns to the jailer and turned to the door.

"Come on; we'll go see the judge," he decided suddenly.

JUDGE SAMES was at his desk when Frisbie entered with his prisoner. He was a thoughtful, middle-aged man, and friendly to the officer. After a word of explanation, he

accompanied the sheriff into the hall outside.

"It's like this, Judge," Frisbie began. "Chuck Rogers is down in the Longhorn, drunk and shootin' off his mouth about a big gold shipment he's bringing back from Gold City in the morning. And old Bill is plumb anxious to see him before he leaves town.

"You remember Chuck and King used to be good friends, back in the old days, and Chuck's been drivin' the stage both times it was held up. Bad Bill's charged with both those jobs, and here he is, back in town, just before another big gold shipment's due."

"H-m-nnn" the judge mused thoughtfully. "You think maybe there's something more than friendship between those two old fellows?"

"There may be. And besides, either Bill or Tom Tynon's gonna kill the other if I turn Bill loose. I staved off a gun-fight between them only a few minutes ago by arrestin' Bill. But when he demanded the right to make bond, I thought I'd better bring him to you."

"That's right; we can't refuse a man the right to ask bond, nor the right to make it when it's set," the judge remarked, turning toward the door. "But the court *can* do something about the amount."

Judge Sames was smiling as he resumed his place behind the desk. But when old Bill slammed down his money and boasted how much the roll contained, the judge cleared his throat and announced, "The sheriff tells me you are a menace to the peace of the community, Mr. King. And you are under arrest for highway robbery and malicious shooting of one Tom Tynon. Therefore, the court deems it prudent to fix your bail at one thousand dollars."

Old Bill sputtered his wrath at that, but subsided after a warning from the judge. And with King safely locked in a cell, the sheriff turned his thoughts to another problem. He would locate Rogers and quiet the old stagedriver before his drunken talk brought on disaster.

He expected to find Rogers in the Longhorn, since he had left him there only a short time before. But in that he was disappointed. Nor was the stagedriver among those in the Bluefront.

Coming from the latter place, Frisbie noticed a buckskin horse at the hitchrack. That horse belonged to a livery stable in Cusack, over on the railroad, where old Bill had rented it to ride over to Parmint. Thinking he might find Rogers at the stage company corral, the sheriff set out in that direction, making a mental note to come back and care for King's horse later.

Rounding the corner of a building, he halted suddenly. Drawn up in front of the corral, with fresh horses in the traces, stood the stage, all ready to leave. And beside it, calmly talking to Rogers, leaned old Bill King, with both his guns back in his holsters.

The sheriff's black eyes were snapping as he crossed the intervening space, and there was anger in his voice as he demanded, "What the devil you doin' here, Bill? It's only been a few minutes since I put you in jail."

"Hold on, now, Sheriff," old Bill cried, hastily jumping back. "Didn't you know I just got out on bond? You can't arrest a man twice on the same charge, and I ain't done a thing since I got out."

"Bond!" the sheriff exclaimed. "Who went on your bond?"

"Damned if I know, Sheriff. But somebody did. The judge telephoned the jailer, right after you left, and said to let me go. If you don't believe that, go ask your jailer. He seemed right mad about it, too."

WONDERING at that, the sheriff hurried to the jail, meanwhile noticing that the stage was heading out of town. The jailer, meeting him at the door, nodded sourly and said, "Sure, he's out. And who do you reckon went his bond? Nobody but Tom Tynon, so's he can plug old Bill quick as they meet."

"I'll see the judge," the sheriff said hastily. But the jailer halted him at the door.

" 'Tain't no use, Sheriff. I talked to the judge. He's worried too, but he says the law requires him to accept bond, after the amount's been fixed and somebody like Tynon lays down the cash. But he wants you to keep a watch on both those fellows."

Frisbie, glancing around, saw Tynon's tall figure loitering in front of the Bluefront; undoubtedly watching old Bill's horse. Swiftly, the sheriff walked to the

bar. He knew there was nothing he could do except warn Tynon. But he certainly meant to do that.

"Looka here, Tom! You get out of town," he ordered crisply, facing the rancher in front of the saloon. "I put old Bill in jail so you couldn't kill him, and you come along and bail him out."

"Where's your law——ordering me outa town thataway?" Tynon countered angrily. "That's my money, and I'll use it to bail out anybody I please. I'm gonna get King soon as I see him. And that'll be just as soon as he comes for that horse."

Quickly, the sheriff reviewed the case. After all, he couldn't make Tynon leave town. And it might be too late if he waited until King appeared. He was heading toward the corral, intending to try and locate old Bill, when he heard a chuckle and turned.

In the doorway of the bar stood Lane Savage. But the politician's first words, like his chuckle, were directed at Tynon.

"Looks like the joke's on you, Tom," he remarked pleasantly. "Here you go and bail Bad Bill out, so you can kill him. And while you're watchin' his horse, he rides yours outa town."

"What the Hell!" Tynon exclaimed, whirling to glance at a hitch-rack down the street. "How you know that, Savage?"

"Didn't I just see him ridin' over the ridge?" Savage countered. "On that fast sorrel of yours, and keepin' on the far side of the stage so he couldn't be seen. Looks like you're out a thousand dollars, unless the sheriff arrests him again for you."

"I don't need no sheriff," Tynon snapped, stepping to the rack and starting to untie the buckskin's reins. "Not much chance to catch that sorrel with this nag. But I'll have a try, anyway."

"Here, that isn't your horse," the sheriff called, remembering it was a livery animal.

"I don't give a damn if it ain't," Tynon retorted, jerking the reins free. "King took my horse, so I'm forkin' hisn."

A small crowd had gathered, most of its members drawn from the Bluefront by the loud talk. Savage, apparently enjoying the situation, grinned as he addressed Frisbie.

"It's not your fault they bailed old Bill out, Sheriff. But it looks like you'll have to bring him back."

"On what charge?" the sheriff asked dryly, a little displeased at the turn events had taken. He had thought of riding after King, but saw no grounds on which he could arrest the man again.

"For stealing Tynon's horse," Savage replied, wallowing in mirth. "And if Tynon gets hard to handle, arrest him for stealing old Bill's horse. That way, you can put both those fellows in jail."

FRISBIE wasn't keen about doing anything on Savage's advice. But he had already thought of following King. When Tynon, unwilling to wait, swung to the saddle of the buckskin and set out, the sheriff started toward the stable where he kept his mount.

He swung out upon the main road at a fast lope, wondering just what he could do if he met old Bill. Savage's suggestion to arrest King for horse-stealing didn't quite click. And Bad Bill had seemed determined to have his freedom until the next day.

Old Bill's statement that he knew nothing about the robberies and shooting of Tynon had borne the ring of truth. And if he had been in Texas the past five years, that fact was capable of proof. Thinking of that brought the sheriff's mind back to Tynon, and the rancher's unflinching determination to have the badman's life.

True, the leader of the stage-robbing gang, comprising three men, had announced both times that he was Bad Bill King. But the outlaws had been masked, and somehow, that bold announcement had seemed a little odd. Could it be that someone, knowing old Bill's boastfulness, was using his reputation to conceal a career of crime?

But the sheriff never let sympathy overrule his sense of duty, and old Bill's actions had seemed a bit suspicious. Just as well to keep an eye out for him, as well as for Tynon and Rogers, until the gold shipment that the stage was to bring back from Gold City the next day was safely through his county.

A few miles out of town, Frisbie noticed a rider on the road ahead. Spurring up his mount, he recognized the man as Tynon. The rancher was cursing the tired buckskin's slowness when overtaken.

"Ain't seen a thing of him," Tynon

answered, in reply to Frisbie's question about old Bill. "But of course, I couldn't overtake that sorrel with this crowbait."

The sheriff, knowing the buckskin was soft, nodded as he fell in alongside. The road at that point was dropping over a hill into a long, narrow, wooded valley that was enclosed by high ridges.

That valley had been the scene of both holdups. It was the only spot between Gold City and Parmint that offered concealment to the bandits and the chance for a quick escape into the hills. The sheriff had a hunch old Bill had turned off the highway there. But though he rode slowly and searched the timbered slopes and rocky crests with a careful eye, he saw nothing of the man.

Five miles farther on, when the road was crossing open country, Frisbie reined up sharply. He had come to the edge of his county, beyond which his authority counted for naught.

When he announced his intention of turning back, Tynon gruffly stated, "I'm goin' on to Gold City if this horse holds out that long."

It was dark when the sheriff got back to Parmint, where he noticed that Savage had remained in town. He expected Savage would want to know if he had again seen Bad Bill. But the rancher-politician asked no questions, and he wasn't in sight when the sheriff went to the stable after breakfast the next morning.

SHERIFF FRISBIE wanted to get an early start. A motley crowd had heard Rogers boasting of the gold shipment the day before, and twenty pair of eyes had lighted up at the news. The stage wasn't due in Parmint until ten o'clock. But the sheriff left immediately after breakfast, intending to escort it from the county line into town.

He was just topping the ridge before riding down into the wooded valley when a movement caught his eye. Down below, the road crossed a dry creek bed, the banks of which were lined with heavy brush. What jarred him to attention was a glimpse of a man on a sorrel horse, dodging into the timber along the creek.

The sheriff reined up sharply. Knowing that he couldn't travel down the road without being seen, he dismounted and led his horse into a cluster of boulders. Keeping to cover, he was half-way down the hillside when he heard the clatter of hooves and the stage burst into view on the opposite ridge.

His first thought was that the team was running away. The horses were stretched out in the collars, running at a gallop; with old Chuck swaying drunkenly on the seat. Even at that distance, the driver's voice came to the sheriff in a snatch of barroom song.

The skulking man in the timber below was momentarily forgotten as Frisbie saw the racing stage. He reasoned that old Chuck had finished up his spree in Gold City and lost control of his team. He might wreck the stage and kill his passengers unless that runaway vehicle was halted.

"No chance to stop 'em without my horse," flashed through Frisbie's mind, as he blamed himself for being afoot. He was whirling when his attention was jerked back to the floor of the valley.

Three men—all masked and carrying guns—had stepped out from the underbrush; one on either side of the road. The man in the middle was lifting his hand in a signal to stop.

That meant a holdup! Robbery of the gold shipment, and Frisbie went plunging openly down the slope.

The rattle of wheels and the plop of hooves came to him as he scrambled down. Once he stumbled. Leaping up, he saw Rogers sawing back on the lines, pulling the leaders back upon the wheelers. And Tynon, on a buckskin horse, had swung out from behind the stage!

A striking thought flashed into the sheriff's mind as he saw that. Could Tynon be in league with the outlaws; could he be the man who was impersonating old Bill King? Below him, the stage had halted. And Tynon was riding forward, his jaw set and his right hand touching his holster.

Up from below came the voice of the bandit leader, sharp as the command of an army officer, when he called to Rogers, "Toss down that gold you're carryin'! I'm Bad Bill King!"

The sheriff knew that voice wasn't old Bill's. Still five hundred feet away, he was clawing at his gun as he fought for footing. Again he stumbled, sprawling down a dozen feet.

As he checked his fall, limped onward, he heard a familiar voice shout,

"You're a damned liar, mister! I'm Bad Bill King myself!"

OUT from the brush on a ledge above the road had stepped a tall, gaunt figure; the figure of old Bill King. And his long, clawlike hands were hovering just above his guns.

However he got there, old Bill's appearance was the signal for action. The bandit leader, holding two guns, half spun about to face the ledge. Up went his weapons, fast. But not quite fast enough.

Old Bill, timing that spin, had drawn with the speed of light. The crash of his old cannon filled the valley, and the bandit, beaten to the draw, went down.

Rogers, perched high on the seat, had dug up a gun to get into the battle. And Tynon, spurring forward, was aiming bullets toward the outlaws. Old Bill dropped another bandit with a slug through the shoulder just as Tynon came plunging past the stage horses.

The third bandit missed a snap shot at Tynon and got a bullet through the arm in return. Alone and crippled, he leaped into the brush beside the road; just in time to collide with the sheriff.

Old Bill, leaping down from the ledge, had disarmed the wounded bandit when the sheriff, with his prisoner, stepped into the road. As King turned to the body of the outlaw leader, he chuckled, "Here's the feller who said he was me."

Frisbie, with an eye on the two wounded bandits, caught a glimpse of the dead bandit's face when old Bill removed the mask. It was Lane Savage, the rancher-politician shot squarely between the eyes. The sheriff turned to the wounded outlaws with a question.

"I might as well come clean, Sheriff," one of them said. "Savage robbed the stage twice before; once to get money to buy a ranch, and the second time for money to stock it with. He tried it again today because he heard Rogers say he would be carryin' gold this morning."

"Why was he usin' my name; just to spoil my reputation?" old Bill cut in.

"No, to profit by it," the outlaw answered. "He thought usin' that name would keep suspicion away from him. And you ridin' into town yesterday made it look just right for this holdup."

The sheriff, glancing up, caught a friendly twinkle in old Bill's eyes. He smiled himself as he remarked, "I see now why you wanted to talk to Chuck. And I'll bet he isn't carrying an ounce of gold."

"He ain't," old Bill admitted. "And he wasn't drunk in Parmint, yesterday, either. We figgered if he played drunk and boasted about that gold shipment, it would lure the bandits into stopping the stage. And I'd be layin' for them along here somewhere when they did. Chuck and I have had this framed up ever since he wrote me that some outlaw was ruinin' my name. But I couldn't carry out my part in jail."

Tynon, dismounting, had stepped up to the group. Old Bill swung facing him, with a tightening of the lips.

"Reckon you figger I run out on you yesterday, Tynon. But I had promised the sheriff to keep outa your way," he snapped. "I'd like to know just what you got again me, anyway?"

"Not a thing, now," Tynon replied, smiling. "I thought you was the man who shot me in the arm, until I saw them fellows stopping the stage. But I reckon you saw I wasn't throwin' lead in your direction."

And the sheriff, after gathering up the horses and the dead and wounded outlaws, noticed Tynon and old Bill riding side by side as they started on toward Parmint.

Slivers Cassidy

the famous gun-shooting cowpuncher is coming to

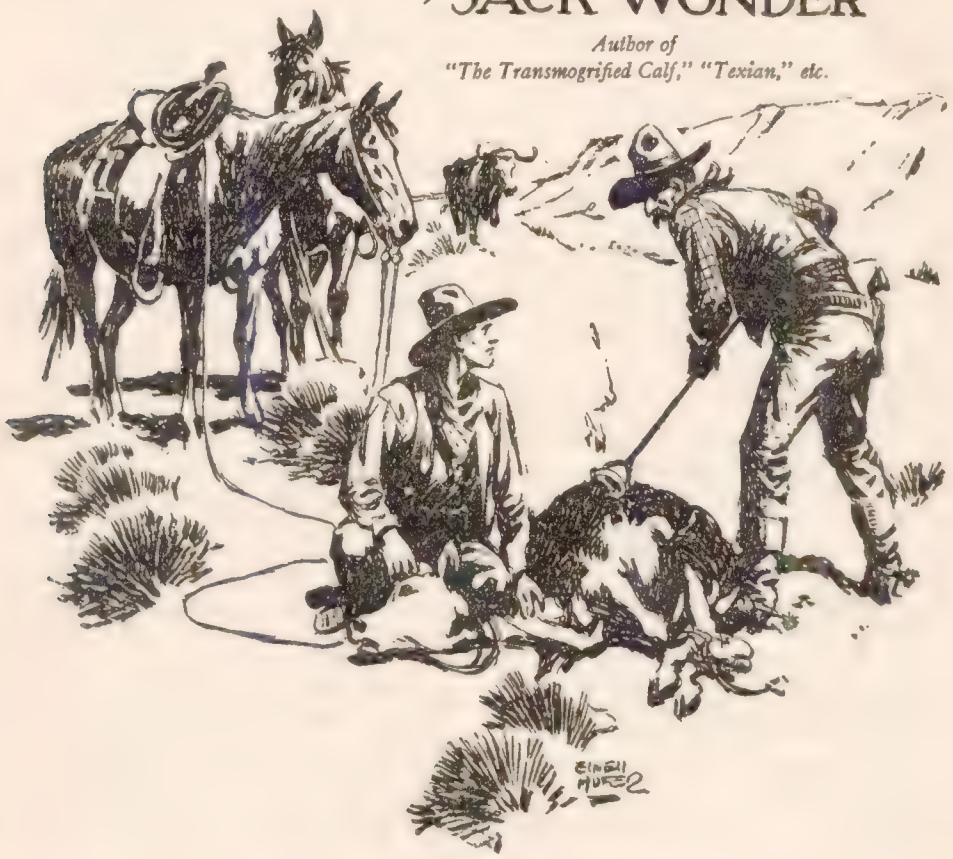
WEST

S O O N

RIGHT MAKES MIGHT

By JACK WONDER

Author of
"The Transmogrified Calf," "Texian," etc.



And that blue eyed kid, Billy Egan, was *right!*

SIDE by side the kid and Duke Rawnor were riding along at a walk. Duke, roughly built, glassy eyed and with a nose like a crag, looked like a fellow to lurk in the brush and play dry-gulcher. He was foreman of the Centerfire ranch.

The kid, youngest hand in that outfit, was seventeen. His name was Billy Egan. He was blue eyed, small and trim and all kid. He made you think of swimming hole stunts, raids on melon patches and high jinks generally.

The two were crossing a wide flat which was open excepting for small patches of ground oaks. The little oaks were bright green, having just leaved out.

From behind one of these shining thickets fifty yards ahead an old Centershot cow hobbled out on three legs. She was followed by a wobbly red calf.

Getting sore at that cow one time for breaking roundup Duke had roped and hogtied her. Dragging her up to the branding fire he had held her left fore foot in the coals. The hoof had come off, then had never grown out again. Hardly able to get round, the old cow always stayed in this part of the pasture.

Billy unfasted his rope. "Duke," he proposed, "You heat yore runnin' iron, we'll save that ole sister heap o' trouble. She goin' to have a dang hard time 'tendin' the roundup to git her new calf branded. Shall I ketch him?"

"Bright idear," said Duke. "Put yore string on him."

Billy roped the calf then sat back in his saddle to wait for Duke to build a branding fire. There was all kinds of

dry stuff dead limbs and so on sticking up or lodged in the thicket. But Duke just sat staring as though he had forgotten what he was to do.

For that matter it seemed to the kid that Duke's mind had been wandering all afternoon. They had left the ranch to size up the regular spring job of ditch cleaning. But before they had examined more than half of the ditches they had wandered off over here to the dry side of the pasture. For the life of him the kid couldn't see why. He should have seen, but never suspected his need.

"Hey, Duke," he presently demanded." Whut ails yuh? Gone to sleep?"

Suddenly slapping his right thigh Duke let out a great bray of laughter. "Say, kid," he said as he looked off across the flat where a quarter mile away fence wires gleamed. "I got the idee for helluva good joke on ole Sam Ochiltree."

Sam's little pasture lay beyond that string of fence. Billy thought lots of old Sam, but he liked fun too. His eyes danced.

"Spill it," he said.

"Here's the idee. We'll run a O on this here calf same as ef we were goin' to put in the dot an' make him a Centerfire. But we won't put the dot in. Sabe? That leaves him with a plain O which is Sam's brand. Well we git the O on yuh'll take him over there into Sam's an' drap him sommers. This ole cow cain't foller 'count o' her foot. I'll head her back to beat hell. Tomorrer Sam'll find this 'ere calf, think it's hisn o' course an' try to teach it to suck some o' his milk cows. Tomorrer night this here ole sister, we'll let her into Sam's. She'll find her calf an' claim it an' it'll know her. Sam he will stand on his head. Be all right though. We'll tell him all about it, put in the dot an' nobody hurt."

There was bad blood between Sam and Duke. But Billy was seventeen. He snatched off his hat, shook it up and down by the crown and he fairly whooped and tried to stand on his head in his saddle.

Half an hour later he and Duke having put Sam's plain O on the calf the kid dropped the little animal over in Sam's pasture about quarter mile. Several of Sam's gentle old cows with young calves were there and the little red tried to make up to them.

Then Billy angled off down through the pasture toward Sam's ranch.

Sam's ranch didn't amount to much, not much more than a homestead, a little shanty for a house, no bunkhouse or cookshack and little dinky corrals.

IT WAS well toward evening when Billy whistling his best to keep from laughing rode up alongside the cow corral.

There were about a dozen cows inside. Sam and his wife were in there milking.

"Lo, Billy," Sam greeted from his milking stool. "Ary other Centershot but you come a ridin' up outa my paster I'd be a doin' some investigatin'. Yes Sir, by Gawd, I would."

"An' like's not," Mrs. Ochiltree called from her sunbonnet, "ye wouldn't do it soon enough neither, Sam."

"But seein' it's you, Billy," Sam went on as, setting his bucket aside, he got up and came lounging out, "I'll ast ye to git down an' look at yore saddle till me an' the woman finishes pailin' the cows. Then we'll all eat supper." And Sam, who was a tall hump shouldered man a little wild of eye, draped himself over the fence.

Billy got down. He liked the Ochiltrees. But of course they were a regular show. They were almost crazymad at the Centershots. Billy got Sam to talking on that subject.

Sam fairly raved when he talked about the Centreshots. He forgot all about the cows. Mrs. Ochiltree had to finish by herself.

She didn't mind. Every little bit she would applaud, "Yo're jist right Sam only ye hain't a tellin' him the half of it. They goin' to have our paster, they half to kill us off. Yo're forgittin' about the ile lease. Tell Billy about that."

Billy knew or thought he knew all about the oil lease. Sam had no time to talk about that anyhow. He was raving about Duke and Mr. Oatick who owned the Centerfire. Sam ran a hundred cows; the Centerfires two thousand. Sam had been running his O several years when Mr. Oatick buying in here had started the Centerfires. Sam had refused to give up his O and had always claimed that Mr. Oatick and Duke had adopted their brand in order to get rich stealing off him. He sounded like a camp meeting preacher

as he stood there waving his arms over the fence.

Finally Mrs. Ochiltree finished, then hurried off to the house and Sam cooled down. First he fed Billy's horse. Then when he had taken care of the milk he took Billy into the house, got out his fiddle and played everything Billy liked. After that they had supper. Mrs. Ochiltree had fried a chicken and she made a raisin pie too, because that was Billy's favorite kind. And when it came to the pie Sam and his wife claimed they didn't care much for it any more and taking only small pieces they made Billy eat all the rest.

He was a little ashamed and had he not known they would both laugh themselves sick when they found out the straight of that calf he would have told them all about the calf right there. But of course that would have spoiled the joke. So he kept still about it.

It was dark when Billy left them. Half an hour later, having galloped all the way, he rode into the Centershot.

There was an automobile all lighted up in front of the cookshack. The boys were all standing around it or sitting on the running boards.

Billy reined up beside the car. It was a big one. It was one that Mr. Oatick always drove when he came out to take some of the hands back to town.

Mr. Oatick often did that. Up in the Wash Basin country a couple of hundred miles away he owned another ranch. On that ranch there was no work to be done except straight riding. Half a dozen men generally did that without any trouble. If one of them got sick or laid off Mr. Oatick, who was always good to his hands, sent somebody up from the Centershot to take the fellow's place until the man was ready to go to work again. For the Centershot man who went it was great. A round trip on the train, first class, Pullman both ways, eats on the diner, too, then after he got up there not a thing to do but ride, no haying, no fence work, no irrigating, and above all, no ditch cleaning. And ditch cleaning, which was a mean job on the Centershot, was just about to begin.

Billy got all excited. He knew that somebody must be going and he wondered who would be the lucky dog.

From the darkness over by the cookshack Duke called, "W'otin'ell yuh been doin'? Mr. Oatick been waitin' on yuh solid hour. He gotta have somebody to go up to the Warsh Basin. Yo're too light to hold a scraper, an' allus prizin' up so much hell keepin' ever'body laughin' nobody half works. Git yore saddle off'n that hoss an' sling it into the car. Yore bed's already been put in. Mr. Oatick's in a hurry. I'm damn glad to git rid o' yuh two three weeks. Hurry up. Don't keep him waitin' no longer."

Billy began uncinching before he slid to the ground.

"Billy," Mr. Oatick called in his hearty voice from over by Duke, "let somebody else attend to the saddle. I'm in a hurry, of course. But not in such a hurry as Duke. Go into the cookshack and eat your supper."

That was the way with Mr. Oatick. He never overlooked the little things.

"Had my supper," the boy answered. "E't over at Sam's."

OVER in the darkness by the cookshack Duke and Mr. Oatick laughed softly.

Billy heard them. He thought he knew why they were laughing. Had he not been so excited and busy with his saddle he would have turned round and told them of the grand sport he had had with old Sam. But the fun with Sam was nothing in comparison with going to the Wash Basin. And as soon as he got his saddle into the car and climbed into the front seat beside Mr. Oatick he forgot all about Sam.

They had driven the twenty miles into brightly lighted old Alkali, had stopped for a drink in the Silver Spur, and they were down at the ticket agent's window in the railroad station before Billy thought of old Sam again and of the trick he had played on Sam.

Then suddenly throwing up his right hand Billy said, "Say, Mr. Oatick. Helluva thing to say. But say, I don't durst to go 'way. I cain't sorter. I forgot somethin'."

Mr. Oatick, who was a large man with a thoughtful face, stared so thoughtfully down, as he grabbed his change, that the boy waited to hear what he was going to say. Mr. Oatick didn't say a thing. Instead he caught the boy by the shoulder, led him swiftly away from the window, hurried him past the people who were waiting for the train and never opened his mouth until the

two were alone in the darkness at the upper end of the platform.

Then very quietly, almost as though he were afraid somebody might overhear, he asked what was the matter.

Explaining about the calf the boy said, "See. If I hain't here to tell Sam how it wuz, Duke will go let him get mean. Like's not Sam, he'll pull his gun on somebody an' have a big fine to pay agi'n like he's done sev'ral time when he's got on the prod over nothin'."

Sam had pulled his gun and had paid several big fines for getting on the prod at Duke and Mr. Oatick over what seemed to be nothing.

But back of it all the thing which kept the foolish but good hearted old rancher broke and in hot water was the artfully hidden game of the very strong man against the very weak.

Oatick had bought the Centershot more with the idea of leasing it for oil than of using it for cattle. When Sam had been approached for a lease he had refused to sign up. That had stopped everything for Oatick. Oatick had made his brand the Centershot with the idea of making the old rancher go bugs and ruin himself.

Through this apparently insignificant business of the calf old Sam was to pay whatever price he must for being in the way of Mr. Oatick. As for Billy, the only Centershot who would have dared take that calf into Sam's pasture he was now to be gotten out of the way until whatever might happen to Sam had happened and was over with.

As for handling the kid afterward. Well, the kid was easily fooled and was only seventeen. Sending him on up to the Wash Basin that night was no trick at all for Mr. Oatick. Mr. Oatick knew how to handle his men.

So when the train came along a few minutes later the bright-eyed kid tumbled his bed and saddle into the baggage car then he went swaggering back to the Pullman, his big white hat on the back of his head, a smile on his face, and good will in his heart for everybody in all the big round world. After all he was going to the Wash Basin.

There was no need his going out to see Sam. Mr. Oatick was going right out there himself, now, first to give Duke a bawling out for such a fool stunt with a rattle headed fellow like Sam, then to go over to Sam's and tell Sam all about it, so that there wouldn't be any trouble over the calf and so that Sam would see too that Mr. Oatick was his friend. Of course something might keep Mr. Oatick from going out tonight. But that was no matter. He would go in the morning anyhow. It was all fine and splendid to blue eyed Billy.

ON A hot still evening three weeks later Billy skipped down onto the station platform in old Alkali from one of the day coaches on a train just in from the Wash Basin run. He had a tarp wrapped bundle over his shoulder. It wasn't his bed. There was a bear skin in it. That was why he had to ride in the day coach. The bear skin smelled so strong. They wouldn't let him ride in the Pullman with it and he wouldn't let it out of his hands. It was the skin of a silver tip. He had killed the bear himself. Fair fight. He hadn't had a rifle even. He had done it with his forty-five. He had used every cartridge too. The bear had been coming like a train of cars and only ten feet away when his very last bullet had pierced its brain. Billy was proud of the way he had gotten that bear and the only thing that troubled him about it was who he would give it to. He felt as though he ought to give it to Mr. Oatick. But he really wanted to give it to old Sam Ochiltree because foolish old Sam and his foolish old wife were always so good to him whenever he came by their place.

With the bear skin over his shoulder he went swaggering off the platform, on his way to Mr. Oatick's office which was far up the one long street.

Old Tom Simmons who hauled trunks and such stuff was just starting up town. At sight of Billy he stopped his little truck, sliding the hind wheels. Then peering through his specs he called, "Lo, Billy, whut yuh got there? C'mon, I'll give yuh a ride up town. Whut yuh got there? C'mon an' tell me about it."

Billy marched over to the truck, told about the bear then said, Tom, I'm a notion then to have yuh take it right on up to yore house. That way won't be no talk about it. Mr. Oatick might want it. I've done made my mind I'd rather give it to Sam."

Old Tom was very near sighted. He

stared through his specs for a long two minutes. Then almost in a whisper he asked, "Billy hain't yuh heered about Sam?"

Billy was just a roustabout kid. He had no folks. Everybody had raised him. He hadn't heard from a soul while he had been up at the Wash Basin.

His face went a little white under his freckles and tan. "W'y whuts happened to Sam?"

"Billy, he got killed the mawnin' after yuh started up to the Warsh Basin. Dave Ruke an' one o' his depities shot Sam down right there in Sam's own house that mawnin', jist when him an' Susie were a gittin' ready to set down to breakfus."

Dave Ruke was the Sheriff.

BILLY dropped the bearskin on the ground. Big tears came into his blue eyes. His lip quivered. It was a long time before he could trust himself to speak. Then he asked, "How come Dave to go an' kill him?"

"W'y, Billy, 'pears like Dave were lookin' for somethin' or somebody out that away awful early that mawnin', him an' one o' his deppities. Jist a-comin' day when they were passin' long through the dry side o' the Centerfire they see a ole dead cow over in Sam's an' a little red calf a buttin' tryin' to make her git up. So they went over to look. The cow were a Centerfire, a ole cripple thing what they say Duke Rawnor burnt her foot off one time.

But the calf had Sam's open O on it. So they went down to the house to bone Sam about it. He flew all to pieces o' course an' begin to cuss Mr. Oatick an' Duke, claimin' it were some game to railroad him. Well, Dave bein' good friend o' Mr. Oatick he wouldn't stand for hearin' Sam talk about Mr. Oatick so they all got mad. Then they claim—though Susy says he never done it—that Sam started for his gun. Anyhow Dave an' the Deppity shot first. They hit Sam five times. But 'fore they got him he'd got his gun an' shot Dave through the arm."

"Yo're shore, Tom," said Billy dry eyed and hard voiced all at once, "that they's no mistake about that old crippled cow?"

"Naw I hain't, Billy. Minute we heered about it, the woman an' me allus bein' friends o' Sam's an' Sussie's, we went right out in the truck. We got out there by nine o'clock an' I went up there an' see the ole cow my own self. She were a Centerfire, all right, an' she didn't have no hoof on one front foot. But the calf, a little red feller, were branded with Sam's O jist like Dave claimed. It were a awful thing, Billy. Didn't seem Sam he would be that kinda feller to steal a calf like that. But he hated Mr. Oatick an' Duke Rawnor powerful strong an' mebbe he went an' done it jist like it looks he did."

Billy's blue eyes were now fairly starting from his head. He bit his lip and the blood ran from it. In a harsh voice he demanded, "Don't nobody know no better'n that?"

"Naw, Billy, they don't. They's no way o' knowin' neither. Susie says Sam couldn't 'a' done it or she'd a knowed about it. She says Duke's bound to have done it late that night after yuh were there with her an' Sam to supper. But course, poor woman, she would think that anyhow."

Billy started off up the street, running. His big hat fell off his head. He didn't notice. But in a little way he stopped to call back, "Where is Susie?"

Billy, what's gotta holt o' yuh?" old Tom wanted to know. "But Susie. Oh she's gone. She were all broke up. So she let Mr. Oatick have their place like he allus wanted. An' she tuk what little money he give her an' went back East to her folks. They say Mr. Oatick leased her place for ile next day after he got it an' they paid him three times as much down, jist to git him to sign, as he paid Susie for the ranch. Seems kinda harder that way. But course Mr. Oatick warnt to blame for that."

"Damn him," Billy fairly shrieked," he *was* to blame! I see it now. An' he'll not git away with it."

Then heedless of old Tom's shouts, the boy ran on up the sidewalk bareheaded. He was on his way to Mr. Oatick's office and he was clutching the handle of his gun.

There was no one on the street to stop him. It was just supper time. As he came clattering up in front of the Silver Spur, Duke Rawnor stepped out on the sidewalk. Duke of course was looking for him.

Billy hadn't been looking for Duke, but he was looking for him now. Duke had but one glimpse of him, then he

started for his gun. He wasn't half fast enough.

The boy covered him, then sobbed, "I'd kill yuh shore as Gawd, but yuh gotta tell the truth. Yuh killed Sam, yuh did, an' yuh goin' to die for that. But yuh robbed Susie too an' 'fore yuh die yo're goin' to tell the truth an' make Oatick give her back her money."

Duke's big craggy face turned all colors. But Duke wasn't quite a weakling. Duke had all kinds of nerve. He hadn't risked getting himself shot at the hands of old Sam Ochiltree half a dozen times in the past five years for nothing. He had already gotten a good stake for what he had done. He had the prospect of big money, too, from royalties to come from the lease on what had been Sam's pasture. And Duke wasn't throwing all that and his life away for the wild bluster of a seventeen year old kid whom he had already tricked.

"See here, kid," he said harshly, "I dunno w'ot yo're talkin' about."

"Yuh don't? Yuh do. So do I. So does this gun. Yuh'll tell the truth, Duke Rawnor, 'bout it all, or shore as Gawd I'll kill yuh."

DUKE'S eyes began to roll. A kid that won't listen is hard to deal with. Duke moistened his lips. Finally he said, "Now see here, I didn't tell about the calf 'cause it wouldn't 'a' done no good."

"Yuh ain't gotta tell about the calf. I know all that. I'll tell ever'body about it too. But what you gotta tell about is drivin' the ole cow in there an' shootin' her after I left, then a sendin' Dave Ruke out there the next mornin'."

There was no way for anybody to prove that on Duke for all it was true. And Duke knew it.

"Aw hell," he said coolly, "yo're talkin' through yore hat. How in hell yuh think yuh kin prove sich a lotta wild stuff?"

"I wont," said the kid ominously. "But if you don't talk, yuh dirty murderin' bluffer, this gun'll prove it with a bullet through yore mouth."

And he drew a bead on the foreman's face.

Then Duke made the mistake of his life. "Now say, hold on," he said, "don't go off half cocked. Ever'thing was straight as a string, Billy. I never had nothin' do with the ole cow; Dave jist happened to be out there hisself that mornin'. Now here, you be a sensible feller. Mr. Oatick he never had no idee w'ot a good thing he was gettin' when he took the ranch off the ole woman's hands. But if our little joke about the calf should come out that would look bad. Lotta envious people would make lotta fool talk. So yuh jist keep yore mouth shet about ever'thing an' if Mr. Oatick don't give yuh a big pile o' jack to keep still, I'll do it myself."

"Yuh fool! Now yuh have told it!" Cried Billy.

At that moment old Tom Simmons who had stopped to pick up the bearskin and Billy's hat stopped his truck out in the street. Then with the kid's hat in his hand the near sighted old man climbed up on the sidewalk.

"Now yuh tell it 'fore Tom," commanded the terrible kid, "an' the minute yuh lie anywhere or leave out a thing this gun will correct yuh for keeps."

There was a chance with a seventeen year old kid and a nearsighted old man. But there wasn't a chance against that kid's gun and Duke knew it. Sweat standing out on his bony face, glassy eyes rolling for fear somebody else would come along, Duke told everything truthfully enough and fast as he could.

Nobody else happened along. Inside of two minutes the three were all standing there silent in the falling dusk in front of the Silver Spur.

The nearsighted old man shifted uneasily on his feet. He didn't know just what to make of all this. Mr. Oatick had always had a good reputation. The old man was afraid that Billy had imagined most of Duke's confession, then forced it from him under threat of the gun. Simple old Tom was confused.

So was the kid. He imagined that everything was over. He held his gun on Duke, but beyond that he didn't know just what to do.

Duke knew what to do. He asked, "W'ot yuh want me to do now? Go down an' give myself up to the Shuriff or what?"

"Do lotta good turnin' yuh over to Dave Ruke," said the kid coldly, "when he done the killin' for yuh."

"Well, yuh gotta do somethin', hain't yuh? Or d'yuh aim for all three o' us to stand here until we take root an' grow?"

"Give Tom yore gun," said the kid

with sudden decision. "I'll take yuh right up to Oatick an' make him come through same as you."

DUKE turned around and put his hands to be disarmed. He turned around to hide a grin that he couldn't keep from showing.

Mr. Oatick was one of those men never known to carry a gun. More than that Mr. Oatick was one of those men who preach against anybody but officers having guns. But all the same Mr. Oatick always carried a gun and knew how to use one. Duke saw a very simple way of disposing of this wildly unhandy kid.

Most unwilling the old expressman took the gun, then obliging proposed to take the two up in his truck. Duke trembled slightly. The killing of the kid would be easy to explain with old Tom to tell afterward how wildly the kid had been cutting up. But the killing of both would be another matter.

Duke didn't tremble long.

"No yuh won't," said the kid decisively. "Tom, I want you where yo're plum' safe. If anything happens to me up there, I want you, Tom, where yuh kin tell how it all come up."

"Aw Billy now," said the old man with a worried air, "are yuh shore all this here hain't some big mistake? Mebbe yuh better not go."

The kid paid no attention to him at all. "Git a move on yuh," he ordered Duke and prodded him in the back with the muzzle of his gun.

For Duke everything now seemed dependent on getting up to Oatick's without being stopped or seen by anyone who might follow too closely. And Duke seemed to be playing in luck. For though it was eight blocks up to Oatick's and people had begun to come out of the houses to gossip from their porches or to stroll down town for the evening mail, the dusk was now falling so deeply that nobody noticed the kid's gun prodding the foreman along.

Oatick was lounging in a big rustic chair on his front porch when the two came up the walk. He saw that Billy was walking a little behind Duke and he half suspected what might be doing. Oatick's gun, a regulation forty-five with all but two inches of the barrel sawed off, was in his hip pocket.

Quite at his ease, Mr. Oatick stood up and put his hands on his hips.

"Git yore hands away from yore sides," the kid commanded.

"Why, Billy! "said Mr. Oatick in his mildest way. "What's got into you? You know I don't believe in guns."

"I do," snapped the kid as, giving Duke a shove, he covered Oatick. "Git yore hands away."

"Fur Gawd's sake Oatick, let him have it! "Duke gasped. "He's the devil! He's onto ever'thing, an' I got no gun! An' old Tom Simmons knows!"

Mr. Oatick drew. The kid's gun barked. Oatick came lurching down the steps with his drawn gun in his hand. But Mr. Oatick was through. Duke lunged for the gun.

"Keep back," the kid ordered. "Yo're goin' to tell it some more."

Then old Tom's truck loaded with men who had come to see how Billy's wild play would turn out arrived. They all saw how it had turned out.

There lay Mr. Oatick with the sawed off gun in his hand, and there stood Duke trembling all over, now not only willing, but wild to talk again, this time to talk for his life.

The next day there was an investigation by the law, for form's sake.

Dave Ruke the killing Sheriff, wasn't in charge of it. A very grave old Judge was in charge. He heard Billy's story, then patting him on the shoulder, he said: My boy, everybody must thank you. It would have been impossible to have gotten at those rascals in any other way. But of course that way wouldn't do very often. Why, boy, when you come to think of it, going after them with your gun, it was just plain lawlessness—might making right."

"Nawsir, Jedge," said the blue-eyed kid earnestly, "I wuz right—an right makes might."

Watch WEST for "The Outside Man," another authentic range story by *Jack Wonder*.

ASK ME AN OLD ONE!

Dear Soogan:
I would like to know what really happened to the buffalo that used to range in the West.

George Allen
Philadelphia, Pa.

IN THE year 1800, American bison ranged from Saskatchewan to Mexico, and from the Sierra Nevadas, to Pennsylvania and New York. The westward movement of civilization shoved the buffalo back to the Ohio River, then to the Mississippi, and finally to the Missouri, beyond which they held sway during the Sixties and Seventies.

When the Santa Fe and Union Pacific railways started west from the Missouri River in the Seventies the demand for hides and meat called many frontiersmen to the profession of buffalo-hunting. The herds numbered from fifty thousand each to a million or more. The early hunting grounds were Nebraska, Kansas and northern Texas.

Buffalo hunters contracted to supply railroad construction camps with a certain number of hind quarters a week. Buffalo tongues were sought by meat dealers, and hunters killed the animals for their tongues alone, at twenty-five cents each. Buffalo Bill drew $500 a month for an average of ten buffalo a day. At one time Dodge City, Kansas, numbered 3,000 buffalo-hunters among 4,000 souls.

The onward march of the railroads split the buffalo into two great masses—the northern and southern herds, the former in Montana, Wyoming and the Dakotas, the latter in Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas and Texas. Hunters averaged 3,500 buffalo a year. At the start, hides sold for fifty cents, but the price soon advanced to $2 and $3.

At Medicine Lodge, then a great trading post, buyers from St. Louis picked up 225,000 buffalo pelts in three months. The slaughter progressed at the rate of 50,000 head per month for years. In two months, around Dodge City, more than 100,000 hides were bundled. The Northern Pacific moved 300,000 hides to market in three years prior to 1884, and that about marked the windup of professional hunting.

Some of the great buffalo-hide shipping centers were Ft. Benton, Medicine Lodge, Dodge City, Wichita, and Dickinson, North Dakota. Always a great fur center, St. Louis was the principal market for buffalo hides, buying as many as 250,000 a year from 1871 to 1882.

Several western states legislated against slaughtering the monarch of the plains, but laws to protect the buffalo were discouraged by such Army officers as Gen. Phil Sheridan who declared that the sooner they killed off the buffalo the quicker he could lick the Indians, and that proved to be the case.

The Indians used the buffalo in scores of ways. Its hide made their moccasins and clothing, their ropes, saddles and tepees. Its meat was used fresh and dried, and buffalo robes served for bedding. When the Red Man's meat supply gave out he was soon herded onto a reservation.

Although outstanding authorities contend that at the close of the Civil War there probably were fifty million buffalo in this country that great mass of wild life on the western plains dwindled by 1887 until there were scarcely five hundred bison in the entire country. Today there are probably twenty thousand in the world, about five thousand being in the United States and eleven thousand in Canada.

Soogan Sam

EARL C. McCAIN

DO YOU remember *Earl C. McCain's* stories *The Indian Sign* and *His Half of Trouble?* The same author has another called *Bad Bill's Good Name* in this issue. Mr. McCain is another of WEST's contributors who has the background to fit him to write the kind of stories that we all like. His letter, which follows, leaves no doubt of that.

In past years, I have followed some half-dozen fiction-inspiring occupations, including soldiering, railroad construction and newspaper reporting; the experiences of which often furnish me with plot material now.

I believe the most valuable of these was newspaper work. It enabled me to meet interesting people, and I usually build my yarns around characters. It also gave me a wide circle of friends on whom I can rely for particular information.

No man can know all occupations, but if a writer has friends who are doctors, engineers, detectives, lawyers and etc., he can always check up on a story touching those fields and avoid trouble for himself and the editors by cutting out any glaring errors. Generally, I mean.

I live in the West because I like it best and have travelled over most of the other Western states by automobile. This gives me the chance to make interesting side-trips and to meet interesting people. It's surprising how many different kinds of people one can meet in an automobile tourist camp in one evening.

I got the idea for *His Half of Trouble* that way. Ran across a couple of inseparable friends, one of whom couldn't fight but was always getting into trouble. The other disliked trouble, but could handle lots of it when necessary. Giving those chaps names and putting them in a mining camp setting made the story.

To me, the finest material for Western fiction lies in the rich old characters still to be found. Gray-haired old fellows who once rode for the Pony Express, trail-herded up from Texas, fought the Indians or lived in the roaring mining camps.

For instance, I drove into Fort Bridger one afternoon, thrilled at the thought of seeing that historic old place. But I almost forgot where I was when I stumbled upon an old trooper there who had lived in that post in the days of Jim Bridger. If that man could write only half of what he has seen, I imagine he'd make an interesting contributor to WEST.

GOLD IS WHERE YOU FIND IT

THROUGH an unlooked for stroke of good fortune, Nevada City, California, seems to have solved its unemployment problem. In the heart of this little village, in early days one of the most noted gold districts in the world, a vein of free gold has been uncovered by men excavating for a base for a new electric light standard. The land is owned by the municipality and the gold vein will be developed to furnish employment for those in need of work. In the early '50's and '60's this section was the scene of extensive placer mining which furnished the basis of the present fortunes of a number of California's wealthy and prominent families.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

(Clippings from Current Newspapers)

TARIFF STARTS CATTLE DRIVE

NOGALES, ARIZ.—Although he probably didn't suspect it, President Herbert Hoover started a cattle drive when he signed the tariff bill.

Sonora, Mexico, cattlemen had awaited the President's pen flourish as a signal and then started their herds across the border to beat the tariff bill, effective at midnight.

The drive began as soon as the measure passed, to escape the higher importation duties imposed by it. Some of the herds which crossed the border under the deadline contained from 500 to 1,000 head of cattle.

OUTLAW TAKES TO HILLS

LAS VEGAS, NEVADA—Dan Renear, state police inspector, and Fred Gleason, sergeant, passed through here recently in their long search for Cliff Ragan, escaped convict.

Ragan, who is about 65 years of age, has been in prison more than half his life, having a criminal record a yard long. He escaped from the Nevada prison several months ago.

Making his way into the country north of Reno, Ragan stole a horse and then continued northward through the Jackson Mountains, into the section where the states of Nevada, Oregon and Idaho meet.

This section is known as the "Hole in the Wall" country, a rough and desolate stretch on the Owyhee River.

Renear and Sheriff Lamb of Humboldt County had tracked their man into this section, and finally made their way to his cabin in the mountains, finding the horse, chaps, and other articles Ragan had stolen en route.

Ragan was not at the cabin, apparently having left it but a few moments before the arrival of the officers. It developed subsequently that he had traveled up on top of a rocky mountain to rustle some food from a sheep herder.

The officers followed, close on the trail of the fleeing convict, and in another thirty minutes would have caught up with him, had it not started to snow.

Night set in soon after the snow started, and the officers were forced to abandon the pursuit. The storm proved a severe one, the thermometer falling to 15 degrees below zero that night. The sheriff felt sure Ragan must have perished during the night, as he was lightly clothed and had gotten wet going through a stream.

Word has just been received from the vicinity that some sheep herders have found Ragan's hat, and there is a possibility that Renear may soon go north again to resume his search for the missing convict.

WILD TURKEYS

NEW YORK—The wild turkey is considered by many a vanishing species, according to Carlos Avery, president of the American Game Protective Association. Its situation, however, is not by any means hopeless and the attention and protection given it is improving.

While the wild turkey has disappeared from all of its northern range, it is still found in most of the southern states in limited numbers. State Game and Fish Commissioner Quinn of Alabama reports that there is a perceptible increase in the turkey population of that state which he attributes to rigid protection of the hen bird.

An open season of four months is permitted on gobblers in Alabama with the season limit of ten which the commissioner insists is too long a season and too large a bag limit. He is right in saying that five gobblers during the hunting season should satisfy the desires of any man.

Alabama has 21 million acres of land not under cultivation. Consequently there is almost unlimited opportunity for development of the wild turkey and other game. Rapid progress is being made in that state in educating the public to conservation needs and methods.

PIZEN OAK SEZ

ANYONE thinks them lynching stories is laid on too thick ain't familiar with them old-time West-tamers.

I recollect onc't a Texas jedge was robbed of his horse. The thief came before him fer trial. The jedge kinda squints at him coupla minutes. Then he says—an' I kin hear them words yet:

"Owing to a personal prejudice, the court will not hear this case. It will be tried by the bailiff who will find a verdict in accordance with the facts:

"In the meantime," his honor says, "the court will go outside and prepare a rope and pick out a good tree."

THE WEEPING TOAD

FEW people who have visited our western states fail to become acquainted with the "horned toad," that curious little reptile so reminiscent of a miniature prehistoric monster, which inhabits a large portion of the southwest and Mexico.

In reality, they are not "toads" at all. The first settlers fancied a resemblance to the common toad, and so named them, but they belong to the lizards. They dwell in the hottest and driest deserts, living entirely on insects. They are creatures of sunshine. They disappear underground long before night, and hibernate during winter.

When handled, these lizards throw a stream of blood the size of a horsehair, apparently from the inside of the eyelid. The Mexicans often call them "weeping" toads for this reason. It is the toad's only defence, as it neither bites nor stings. There is recorded the instance of a captive toad which spurted a stream from both eyes for a distance of four feet, causing 103 spots of blood one-eighth inch in diameter, and all this in one and a half seconds.

Science has as yet failed to learn how the trick is done, nor even if it is common to all the seventeen kinds of horned toads!

THE CHUCK WAGON
(Driv'n by Old Pizen Oak)

NEXT WEST most lost me my job. Right in the worst o' circle-ridin' time she come out to the wagon—right when punchers is comin' in fer chow all hours o' the day er night, an' the boss is worrited to make sure he's got all the cattle out'n the canyons, an' ev'body's on trigger edge.

Wal, feller readers, somehow 'nother spiten all that. I manages to read the October 1st WEST from kiver to kiver. Ain't no question but what she compares favorable with WEST's best numbers.

GEORGE C. SHEDD is back with *The Devastatin' Dude*—an' the top-character into it ain't sech a dude, neither. He's a four-fisted, fightin', hell-fer-larrupin' feller—an' no mistake.

FRANK C. ROBERTSON, one o' yer ol' fav'rites has one of his best short stories in, too. It's a long short story an' is called *That Harmless Dutchman*. One of the best shorts Mr. Robertson's ever turned out an' that's sayin' a heap.

I wants to call your attention special to *Sundown* by BUD LA MAR. It's a horse story—the first WEST has printed fer some time—WEST *picks* its horse stories, an' when they picks one it's right. They's a coupon on page 128. Jest fill it out an' let's hear your opinion o' *Sundown*.

CHARLES W. TYLER is present this time, too, with *Baldy Sours and Burning Brands*—cal'lated to drag a laugh out'n the smokiest one o' yuh.

An' WEST keeps on bringin' out new authors. This time JOSEPH HARRINGTON with *The Backward Trail*.

The Gun Doctor is JAMES P. OLSEN'S top-stuff—you know—the kind o' thing he does—hard-boiled, but real an' grippin' nonetheless.

All right, there she lays. Dated October 1st she makes a three point landin' on the stands September 17th. Come ev'body an' all your friends. Good readin'—yuh got ol' Pizen Oak's word fer it!

WEST gives a prize of twenty-five dollars every two weeks for the most interesting letter from a reader. Every one has a chance—no date limits—a new prize every issue! The letter can be about anything in the West (either the country or the magazine). It can be facts, suggestions, criticism, or history——Don't fail to try your luck!

WE RECKON this old-timer has a prize coming to him!

West letter dept.
Hello there waddies:

My first memory is of crossing a lake at night to escape from the Sioux warriors under Little Crow in the summer of 1863. My gun education began when I was eight and at fourteen I was called good with any gun anywhere. I hold records unbroken since made in 1911 made with an S & W gun with a six-inch barrel before seven witnesses in Cedar Valley, Utah—three hits out of five shots from the saddle of a running horse at a running jack rabbit in three-foot sage brush. Have made a freak shot with an old 48 Colt 9 inch barrel at a hat sailed high. One bullet left five holes in the hat. The brim was turned up by air pressure, the crown deeply creased, so a bullet penetrated the brim and both doubled sides of crown making five clean holes at one shot. Have amused myself many times killing rabbits from saddle of running horse with belt gun and found it feasible. I was trained to always shoot squirrel in the eye with rifle and have killed ten grouse in succession by cutting heads off with rifle bullets with no miss and once cut the head of a crow in half with a rifle at 55 yards, when only head was to be seen. The crow was between two furrows of a plowed field. I have killed birds flying with a twenty-two rifle. I beat Quickshot Joe, expert with Buffalo Bill in three successive contests with twenty-two rifles, stunt shooting and he announced to the audience that he conceded I was a better rifleman than he ever was or ever would be.

Have ridden a few mad ones but never liked that kind of play and took mine gentle when possible, though have mounted one just as the first rider landed on his back in the dust and rode the bad one to a standstill. Blast his tricky hide, I was mad at that one for busting my nose with his cheekbone and declared I would ride him down unless he killed me first. Rode same horse later, after it had broken my thighbone by throwing himself back on me and, brought him to the corral meek and lathered—a truly devilish horse, tricky and mean, that fought from the time he felt weight in the saddle until he gave up, and decided to be good. Yet he was wonderful under the saddle, easy gaited smooth moving, and perfect after he had quit helling. Have had years of experience behind a badge as a deputy and never yet fired a shot at a human, as they all obeyed orders in good order seeming to prefer to quiet down when so instructed. Even known killers submitted instantly when there were five in the bunch. Why? They knew why, and I did not ask them to explain, being glad to see them wilt at sight of my pair of guns. The sheriff believed he knew why, and said, "Because they knew it was good judgment to obey just then." Mebbeso mebbe not I dunno.

E. E. Harriman, 1739 E. 1st St.,
Long Beach, Cal.

And Mrs. Evans adds her bit to our stock of snake stories.

Dear Sir:

After reading R. R. Critchlow's letter in West about the king snake and the rattler, of course I felt I must tell my snake story.

My husband's health failed and the doctor ordered him to a high dry climate, so we went over to Lake County, Oregon, and took up a homestead on the edge of the desert. I raised a good many turkeys and they sure could locate rattlers, and then what a fuss they would make until some one came and killed it. They would not fight one.

The turkeys used to go each morning about a mile from home to a field where the grasshoppers were very thick. We always followed them down to this field for fear the coyotes would get some of them as they went through the sage. One morning my nephew, a lad about ten years of age, and I were following them when all at once the air seemed charged with that terrible rattle which just brings you up a-standing and there is no doubt in your mind what it is even if you have never heard one before.

I told Hewitt to stand still until I located the rattler for from the sound you can not tell where they are or how close, and they are hard to see for they are so near the color of the sand and sage. I kept moving slowly and watching and after taking about six or seven steps saw to the side of us about thirty feet in an opening a rattler coiled. And slowly crawling around him was a big bull snake or "blow snake" as they all called them there. They resemble a rattler a great deal in looks. I called Hewitt to me and we went up to within six feet of them and watched. That old blow snake just kept crawling around, never getting a bit closer and just out of reach of the rattler if he struck. The rattler showed he was badly frightened and kept up that terrible rattle, but at last he lost his head and struck. And quicker than the eye, the blow snake grabbed rim right back of the head and then, while holding his head he wound around the rattler, crushing the life out.

A rattler is a coward; if you corner one and he sees he can not get away he will commit suicide by biting himself. They will strike themselves twice and die in a few minutes.

Mrs. Mae Evans, 553 Market St.,
Klamath Falls, Oregon

The Laugh Corral

There once was a guy named Neal,
Whose skull was tougher'n steel
He was shot in the head
But it spattered the lead
Which killed two men at his heel.

Francis Wallace, McGehee, Arkansas, takes the blame for this one.

WEST pays $2.50 for each joke, verse, or limerick used. So many are received that we cannot acknowledge those unaccompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

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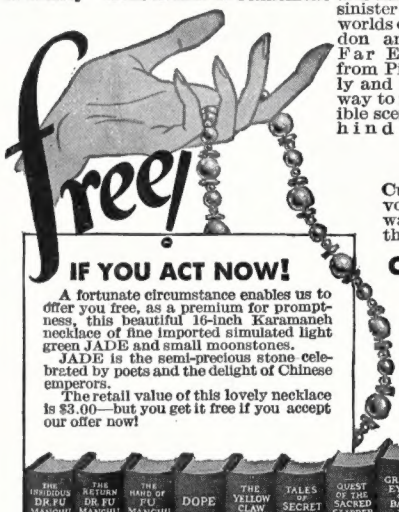

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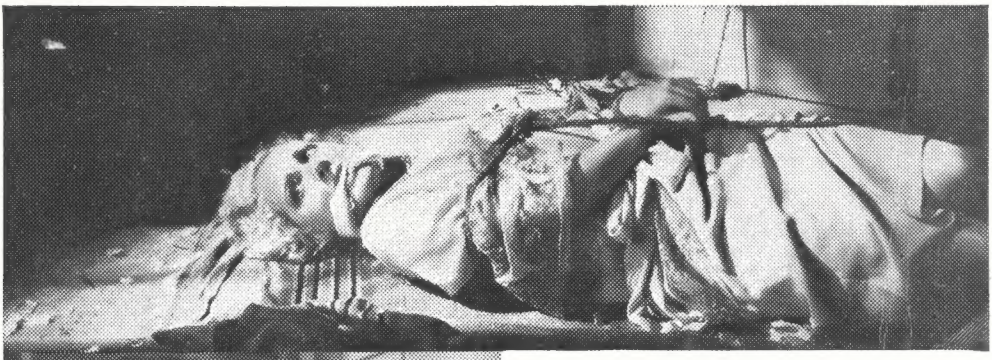

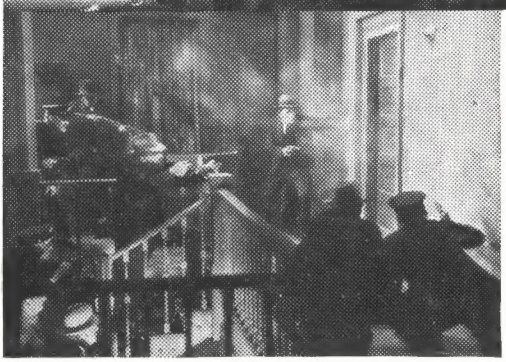

Top: From the Bishop Murder Case; *below:* While the City Sleeps, both Metro Goldwyn Mayer All Talking Pictures

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